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Petru Golban

The Beginnings of British Literature

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) and Medieval Literature

Üç Mart Press

Kütahya – 2007

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Front cover: *My Father's Soul* by Atanas Karachoban

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To the User

The present book is to be considered in a series of books dealing with the history of English literature. It should be useful to a more general reader or anyone concerned with English literature, whose knowledge on particular aspects of the literature in Britain might be enriched by the reading of the present book. However, the primary aim of the book regards the needs of students of English in their literature classes, and the book meets the requirements of a teaching aid, while also representing an attempt of academic research in the field of literary history and criticism.

In particular, the present book focuses diachronically on English literary phenomenon from its Anglo-Saxon beginnings to the end of Middle Ages, and it covers the first two periods and experiences of English literary history – Old English and the actual Middle Ages – and in this respect the reader of the present book learns the characteristics, literary conventions and genres, main writers and major works, and the literary interaction and continuity of the given periods.

INTRODUCTION

British Literature in History

In terms of a media-culture perspective, the decline of literacy and the indefinite future of the imaginative writing are nowadays matters of general lament, as it is the fact that literature might have lost its primary role to satisfy the aesthetic and intellectual needs of the modern man. Facing a complexity of new cultural alternatives, our contemporaries display exaggerated confidence in television, cinema, computers, and Internet; they often watch television or surf the net web-pages instead of reading books, use tapes for learning languages or compact discs for getting acquainted with Dickens' novels. The books, then, would survive a limited time in the human cultural store, and many of them are in danger of being forgotten in a remote corner of an old library.

The concept of literacy is an essential principle for the survival of the books, yet, besides literature, literacy refers to many other types of mass communications and theories of mass culture, and literature is not the only reliable vehicle for cultural communication, improvement of modern thought or acquisition of information. In some of these respects, one may argue, television and computer are much more reliable, practical, and resourceful tools than the whole of imaginative writing. On the other hand, the invention of television and the computer has not decreased the printing of books; moreover, the computer screen, Internet, and communication through e-mail display more alphabetic letters than images.

The problem is not to oppose visual and written types of cultural communication. It is that, though the whole of image-oriented culture and media attempts at reifying a new form of literacy, the problem consists in a general illiteracy caused by the open exposure to a form of visual illiteracy of the media and the insufficient exposure to important and mind-appealing books. In vindicating the role of imaginative literature, "*do not fight against false enemies*", says Umberto Eco in ***Apocalypse Postponed*** (1995), because, first of all, "*we know that books are not ways of making somebody else think in our place; on the contrary they are machines which provoke further thoughts. Secondly, if once upon a time people needed to train their memory in order to remember things, after the invention of writing they had also to train their memory in order to remember books. Books challenge and improve memory. They do not narcotize it. This old debate is worth reflecting on every time one meets a new communicational tool which pretends or appears to replace books*".

What has shown itself as a modality capable enough to reassure and strengthen the role of literature as an agent able to satisfy the intellectual needs of humans is the permanent re-evaluation of the past national and international literary heritage, as well as the evaluation of the contemporary literary practice, in the context of what Matthew Arnold more than one hundred years ago described as a disinterested effort to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world. This endeavour, the Victorian scholar believes, is the 'real estimate', the real approach to literature leading to its true understanding and to "*a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy*". These ideas seem nowadays superfluous and obsolete, being long ago rejected and replaced by the more scientific and methodological critical perspectives of formalism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and other approaches developed by the twentieth-century literary theory and criticism.

In the most general terms, the previous and subsequent to Matthew Arnold periods have developed in the field of literary studies three major perspectives of approach to literature, three directions offering theoretical and practical possibilities to study and understand literature, and which are commonly referred to as critical, theoretical and historical. The three approaches to literature – literary theory (the theory of literature), literary criticism, and literary history (the history of literature) – despite the huge debates over their functions and even necessity, represent three distinct scientific disciplines having their own definitions, characteristics, terminology, objects of study, and methodologies; they are interconnected, having obvious points of identification and separation.

The standard dictionary definition regards history of literature as the diachronic approach to literature (including literary periods, movements, trends, doctrines, and writing practice). Literary criticism is the study/analysis/investigation/approach to particular literary texts on both thematic and structural levels. Literary theory develops and offers general methodologies and principles of research of the literary phenomena. If the first approach embarks on a diachronic perspective in literary studies and investigates the development of a national and world literature, the second is considered synchronic, and the third one is referred to as universal. In matters of subjectivism and objectivism, the history of literature and especially literary theory are designated as sciences, requiring normative and methodological objectivism, whereas literary criticism allows subjectivism to intermingle with objective reasoning, art with science, fusing in one discourse the personal responses to literature and the scientific research, but what the critical discourse requires most is the accurate balance between the subjective and objective component.

Literary theory, literary criticism, and literary history are interrelated and interdependent, and co-exist in the field of literary studies

as bound by their major and common object of study which is the literary work. Their interrelationship and interdependence form a permanent circular movement from the historically placed literary practice to literary criticism, from literary criticism to literary theory and from literary theory back to criticism. The text – either produced recently or representing an earlier period in literary history – is subject to literary criticism whose concluding reflections (the necessary outcome of literary criticism), if generally accepted and proved valid in connection to other thematically and structurally similar literary texts, emerge into the domain of literary theory, become its general principles of approach to literature, and are applicable to the study of literature in general.

Literary criticism uses them in practical matters of research whenever the study of particular literary works is required, adding to the objective theory the critic's individual response to the text, and the expected result is, on one hand, the development of new or alternative theoretical perspectives, and, on the other hand, the change, promotion, discouragement, revival or in some other ways the influence upon the literary practice of its own historical period, and the influence upon the literary attitude of the reading audience concerning the contemporary and past literary tradition.

Literary criticism is thus not to be regarded as just the analysis or evaluation of particular literary works but also as the formulation of general principles of approach to such works. Co-existing in the field of literary studies with literary history and literary theory, literary criticism combines the theoretical/scientific and practical levels of literary analysis. Criticism as science follows and applies the general principles and methods of research from literary theory, but it also reveals an artistic aspect when the critic personalizes the discourse by his/her own opinions. The true literary critic uses literary theory to evaluate the literary text, and out of the synthesis of

the borrowed theory with his/her personal opinions the critic develops other theoretical perspectives while keeping the proper balance between the objective and subjective component, between the use of theory and personal contribution.

This relationship of the three approaches to literature suggests that literary history is more of a distinct discipline, standing apart, whereas literary theory and literary criticism are stronger connected, hence their consideration as one discipline under the generic name of 'literary theory and criticism'. However, this relationship of the three approaches to literature also points to the fact that literary theory, literary criticism, and the history of literature are parts of a single cognitive system, a single discourse whose aim is to form or facilitate a particular type of communication which involves the producer of literature and its receiver.

Literature, a cultural phenomenon, one of the arts, the verbal art, is in the simplest way defined as imaginative writing and is likewise better understood as a system of elements framed within the boundaries of a communicative situation. The six elements in communication, as identified by Roman Jakobson (***Linguistics and Poetics***, 1963),

Context

Addresser Message Addressee

Contact

Code

each having a corresponding function of language (referential, emotive, poetic, conative, phatic, and metalingual), receive in literary communication their equivalent parts ('addresser' or 'sender' is the 'author' or 'writer', 'message' is the 'text', 'addressee' or 'receiver' is the 'reader', and so on) which constitute the elements of the literary system. Guy Cook in ***Discourse and Literature*** (1995) identifies and places these elements in a simple but comprehensive structure of the literary communicative situation:

Society

Author Text (Performer) Reader

Texts Language

Every literary work represents a text, the product of an author, known to us or anonymous; the literary work addresses a reader; its material is language; it is produced in relation to a certain social background; and it always exists in relation to other texts that represent previous literary traditions or the contemporary to the given literary work period. The literary work in itself and the different relations between the text and the other elements of the literary system gave birth to different theories, trends and schools in modern literary theory and criticism. As a result, the contemporary literary critic faces a multitude of schools and theories that correspond to the categories from the structure of the literary system. Instead of heavily borrowing ideas and providing quotations from the existing critical and theoretical studies, the critic may relate and apply them to his/her particular matters of concern. A more skilled critic considers the essence of different theories, modifying it according to the specificity of the research, and, by providing personal points of view and ideas, the critic progresses to certain interpretative modalities of his/her own.

Concerning the most important critical theories, trends and schools, and according to Guy Cook's literary communicative situation, in the field of literary theory and criticism the 'author' is the matter of concern of literary scholarship and biography; 'text' is studied by formalism, linguistics, linguistic criticism, and stylistics; 'performer' by acting theory; 'reader' by phenomenology, hermeneutics, reception theory, reader-oriented and reader-response theory, as well as by psychoanalysis, feminism, and post-structuralism; 'society' by Marxist theories, cultural materialism, new historicism, and feminism; 'texts' by structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction; and corresponding to 'language' are the theories of

linguistics and stylistics. Literature on the whole and the particular elements of the literary system are also the matters of critical concern of rhetoric, semiotics, Bakhtinian criticism, archetypal and myth criticism, ethnic literary studies, colonial, postcolonial and transnational studies, cultural studies, and other contemporary trends and schools in humanities and in literary theory and criticism.

These theories, trends and schools represent the twentieth-century and the contemporary scientific, objective and methodological literary theory and criticism. The development of world literary theory and criticism has its origins in ancient period, whereas concerning the rise and development of the theoretical and critical discourse on literature in Britain, one should consider Renaissance and its subsequent periods.

Literature on the whole and the particular elements of the literary system represent the main concern of the history of literature as well, in particular in the light of Paul Ricoeur's (***From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II***, 1986) hermeneutic perspectives of the textual arrangement and text analysis with regard to the human experience considered diachronically: (1) the implication of language as discourse, (2) the implication of discourse as a structured literary work, (3) the relation between verbal and written form in the discourse and structured literary work, (4) structured literary work/discourse as the projection of another world, (5) structured literary work as the projection of the authorial life which is transfigured through the discourse, (6) structured literary work as the self-comprehension of reader.

The literary work is undoubtedly a phenomenon dated in time, and represents, as Romul Munteanu clearly states it in ***Metamorphoses of the Modern European Criticism*** (1988), the product of a historical time in which a human group develops a particular view on existence, a view that comes to be expressed by exceptional individuals, the producers of literary

works, themselves exponents of a particular historical background. In this respect, the discipline of the history of literature performs a historical investigation of literature, and studies the national and world literary development in relation to its periods, movements, trends, writers and works.

Modern literary theory and criticism discusses the literary work as a synchronic phenomenon, removing the text from its temporal and spatial context. The separation of criticism from the diachronic dimension of the literary history and its subsequent consolidation as a distinct domain were caused, according to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren (***Theory of Literature***, 1942), by the distinction between the consideration of literature as a simultaneous order and the view on literature as a line of works arranged chronologically and regarded as constituent parts of the historical process. Neither the research of the text as a synchronic phenomenon nor the historicism of the literary experience are to be neglected, but in order to achieve the adequate comprehension of the literary works of different writers and periods, it is necessary to overcome the gap between literary criticism and literary history by fusing the synchronic and the diachronic dimension in literary analysis, and by strengthening the relationship between text and context. It is the task of literary criticism to involve the diachronic perspective in the study of the text.

Otherwise, without understanding literature in its growth, the relationship between tradition and innovation, the origins of literary work, the author's psychology and artistic sensibility, and the social and cultural circumstances that make possible the production of the work and are reflected in the work, the critic would scarcely offer competent judgement on the value of the text. Likewise, it is the task of literary history to remain a scientific discipline by involving in the study on the rise and development of literature the synchronic dimension of the literary criticism and the scientific

principles of research offered by the literary theory; that is, the history of literature, in order to claim the status of a science, must be a rigorous system equipped with scientific methodology.

Otherwise, the history of literature might be reduced to a mere gallery of biographies, or become, as Hans Robert Jauss warns in ***Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory*** (1970), an obsolete object of study, whose existence would be determined only by a didactic purpose and the necessity of being traditionally included as a part of cultural information.

Earlier than Jauss, at the beginning of the twentieth-century, Yuri Tynyanov (***On Literary Evolution***, 1927) had already pointed at the methodological discrepancy in the field of literary history, which is due to the divergence between an *individualistic psychologism* in the historical investigation of literature and a *schematically causal approach to the literary order*. The former type replaces the problem of literature with the question of the author's psychology, and the investigation of literary history becomes the investigation of the genesis of literary phenomena. The latter leads to a sharp disagreement between the literary order and the point of observation that might be located in a social order: such an effort of literary history to investigate the advances of a literary order (that is, of literary variability), Tynyanov believes, is doomed to incompleteness because the study of a closed literary order and the examination of the development within it frequently come up against neighbouring cultural, behavioural, and social orders in the broad sense.

Literature is above all interrelated with social conventions, and as such the correlation takes place first of all through its verbal aspect. That is, the interrelation between literature and society is realized through language, and in relation to social background the prime function of literature is its verbal function. Using the term 'orientation' to denote the author's creative intention, Tynyanov suggests that the intention is changed by the structural

function (the interrelationship of elements within a work) into a catalyst, the 'creative freedom' yields to 'creative necessity', and the literary function (the interrelationship of a work with the literary order) completes the process, the 'orientation' of a literary work proving to be its 'verbal function', its interrelationship with the social conventions. It is futile to study the verbal function of literature in relation to some distant conditions, such as economic, as it is useless to study directly the author's psychology, environment, daily life, and class as to establish the origins of the literary phenomena. Clearly, Tynyanov believes, the problem here is not one of individual psychological conditions, but of objective, evolving functions of the literary order in relation to the adjacent social order.

Likewise, in discussing practical criticism in the book ***Critical Approaches to Literature*** (1982), David Daiches states that the approach to literary work should be different from going to biography or psychology to discover the author's 'intention', for "*it is less personal intention than artistic tradition that is the real question*".

Back to Tynyanov, the two main types of the historical investigation of literature – the investigation of the genesis of literary phenomena and the investigation of the growth of a literary order – are both problematic, as problematic is the theory of value that has brought about the danger of studying major but isolated works and has changed the history of literature into what Tynyanov calls *history of generals*, i.e. of 'great works', in determent of the study of mass literature. The very term 'history of literature' is a problem as well, as it seems to be extremely broad and pretentious, suggesting the study of the history of *belles lettres*, the history of verbal art, and the history of writing in general.

In Tynyanov's opinion, which is nowadays still valid and viable, the solution for making literary history a literary science, conferring to it the necessary methodological rigour, is to re-examine the problem of

'influence', one of the most complex problems of literary history, in relation to the existence of specific literary conditions. More than that, it is necessary to reconsider the notion of 'tradition', the basic term in the studies on literary history, in the light of the fact that a literary work is a system, as is literature itself, and the fundamental concept for literary change and development is the 'substitution of systems'.

The literary system is *a system of the functions of the literary order which are in continual interrelationship with other orders*. The system of a literary work consists of certain elements that are interrelated and interacting. Some elements of a work in prose, such as rhythm, are also elements of the system of a work in poetry, and their study shows that the role of such elements is different in different systems.

The interrelationship of each element with every other in a literary work and with the whole literary system as well is called the *structural function* of the given element. This function reveals that a distinct element is, on one hand, interrelated with different elements within the same work, and, on the other hand, it is interrelated with similar elements in other works and even in other systems. The former is termed by Tynyanov the *syn-function*, and the latter *auto-function*, both operating simultaneously but being of different relevance.

Tynyanov points at the mistake to isolate the elements from one system and to correlate them with other systems without taking into consideration their structural function, as he notifies on the impossibility to study a literary work as a system without comparing it with the general system of literature. Such an isolated study of a literary work may be successful in the literary criticism that focuses on contemporary works, since the interrelationship of a contemporary work with contemporary literature is involuntarily taken as an established fact.

However, argues Tynyanov, even in contemporary literature, isolated study is impossible because the very existence of a text as literary depends on its interrelationship with both literary and extra-literary orders, and its existence depends on its function. What in one period would be a matter of social communication, in another would be a literary fact, or vice versa, depending on the whole of the literary system in which the given text appears. Thus, no one can be certain of the structure of a work if it is studied in isolation, since the auto-function (the interrelationship of an element with similar elements in other systems) determines the syn-function (the constructional function of the element).

According to Tynyanov, the *constructional function* is the correlation of each element of the literary work with other elements of the system, and thus with the whole system. It is a mistake to separate the elements from the system and to correlate them outside the system, that is to neglect their constructional function. The existence of a literary fact depends on its differential quality, that is its function.

The rise and development of the literary form determines the change of function, yet the function in its turn searches for its form, hence their interdependence. The variability of the function of a formal element of the system, the appearance of a new function of a formal element or its association with another function, the differential interaction of the elements of a system, the existence of some 'dominant' elements that produce as such the 'deformation' of other elements mean actually, in Tynyanov's opinion, the *literary evolution as the substitution of systems*. In other words, to understand the development of literature as the 'substitution of systems' is to perceive it as *the change in interrelationships between the elements of a system, between functions and formal elements*.

Coming back to the concept of 'tradition' in literature, it is to be remembered that the substitutions of literary systems vary from period to

period; they may occur rapidly or slowly; they do not necessarily require the complete renewal or replacement of the formal elements of the system but rather a new function of these formal elements (hence the idea that the comparison of certain literary phenomena must be made on the basis of functions, not only forms). And thus what may be called 'traditionalism' is, as to give an example from Tynyanov, the fact that each literary movement in a given period seeks its supporting point in the preceding systems, as each new genre, form or type of literary text does.

Yuri Tynyanov's ideas on literary work and literature conceived as systems are applicable in different domains of humanities, such as linguistics (as language itself is a system), translation studies, and cultural studies, and in different literary disciplines, such as comparative literature, where, in particular, the issue of 'reception' – the study of the process of reception of a literature (as a system) in another literature or another cultural background (conceived as systems) – receives a strong theoretical and practical basis. Although highly important for the elucidation of the status and role of literary history as a scientific discipline, Tynyanov's theory of the literary system, due to its normative principles and methodological rigour, may not always be appropriate in the study of literature when facing some national peculiarities of literary history, or the individual creative imagination that is both ready to assume an established tradition, model or pattern of writing and to provide the unexpected innovation, literary experimentation, and modernization of the literary discourse.

The interrelationship between 'tradition' and 'innovation' in the historical advancement of literature acts upon a literary system that, by placing a group of its elements in the 'dominant' position, makes possible the deformation of the other elements, and a new work emerges into literature and takes on its own literary function through this 'dominant'.

This is the factor that determines the change and development of the literary phenomena in the course of different succeeding periods.

This is true concerning genres as well as periods and movements. Thus the literary system of the medieval romance changes in Renaissance into the system termed by the noun 'roman' ('novel') when elements of extended narration, setting, character representation and others become 'dominant', and others like verse form and the supernatural element are extinguished; on the contrary, when other elements, such as love intrigue, subjective and psychological experience, the fantastic and the irrational involved in action, are placed in the 'dominant' position, the literary system of the romance is substituted in the second half of the eighteenth-century by the system of a particular type of poetry called by the adjective 'romantic'. The element of 'the revival of ancient classical tradition' in the literary system of the Renaissance period becomes 'dominant' in relation to the social and cultural orders (systems) of the next seventeenth- and eighteenth-century, making possible the substitution of the system of Renaissance literature by that of Enlightenment.

This is also true concerning any particular literary tradition, or type of literary text. The 'dominance' of such elements as adventure, ordeal, trial, chronotope of road, moral issues of personal conduct, love experience, autobiography, change of condition with respect to social background, representing the system of the picaresque novel, to which the 'dominant' element of character formation is added in Goethe's ***Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre***, makes possible the rise in the nineteenth-century of the fictional system of the Bildungsroman. This type of novel, now a literary tradition, seeks its supporting points in the previous systems, especially in those of the ancient and picaresque narratives, but places in its turn a group of its elements in the 'dominant' position, makes possible the deformation of other elements, and as the result works representing the related fictional

types of Entwicklungsroman, Erziehungsroman and Künstlerroman emerge into world literature.

Each literary work is correlated with a particular literary system depending on its deviation, its 'difference' as compared with the literary system with which it is confronted. Moreover, since a literary system is a system of the functions of the literary order which is in continual interrelationship with other orders, such as social and cultural, systems change in their composition, but the differentiation of human activities remains. The growth of literature, as of other artistic systems, does not coincide either in rate or in character with the social and cultural systems with which it is interrelated, and this is owing to the specificity of the material with which it is concerned. The rise of the structural function occurs rapidly, that of the literary function occurs over epochs, and the one concerning the functions of a whole literary system in relation to neighbouring systems occurs over centuries.

The place of literature in history is reified by the rise, development and consolidation of succeeding each other literary periods, movements, trends, writers, and literary works. Each of these is rooted in the previous ones, represents a continuation of the previous ones, and at the same time rejects the previous ones, attempting at suppressing them and taking their place in literary history.

Each period, movement, trend, writer, and text is followed by another; each has its own rise, development, consolidation and decline, but not complete disappearance, as each one influences the next, gives its origins or is rejected by the next one, or the elements of its system are acknowledged in the systems of the subsequent periods, movements, trends, and literary works under different forms and functions. Each period, movement, trend, writer, and text represents one to another tradition and

innovation, placed one against the other, where a continuous ‘battle’ takes place between their elements.

The status of literature in history is actually determined by the interrelationship, the ‘fight’ between ‘tradition’ and ‘innovation’, ‘classical’ and ‘modern’, ‘conservative’ and ‘experimental’, dependence on rules and the freedom of artistic expression. It is a correlation of two contrary factors whose interaction is the motor of change and development of literature, disclosing the substitution of systems. In the history of literature, the concept of ‘tradition’ is used to denote the ancient classical period, the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, also referred to as Classicism or Neoclassicism, the nineteenth-century Realism, the twentieth-century socially-concerned literature; the term ‘innovation’ denotes some literary experiences of the Renaissance period, metaphysical poetry, Romanticism, the late nineteenth-century Symbolism, Aestheticism and other avant-garde trends, and the twentieth-century Modernism and post-modern literature, as well as other more recent experimental trends.

In this respect, the literary history studies the rise and development of a national literature and the world literary phenomena from its beginnings to the present day, and divides the historical process into literary periods which may or may not correspond to the social or political ones. The literary periods consist of literary movements and trends, which are represented by authors and their literary works and/or literary doctrine. The distinction made between the movement and the trend relies actually on the fact that a movement groups those writers who produce both literary works (that share similar thematic and structural features) and literary doctrine (texts of literary theory and criticism that share common ideas about their own type of literature) – Romanticism, for example; whereas a trend is formed of the producers of only literary texts having common characteristics – the nineteenth-century Realism, for example.

The literary periods are considered to refer to different sequences of time conceived in the temporal boundaries of an age, century, centuries, or years, but such an understating of the period may thwart any attempts at tracing clear demarcation lines between literary periods, movements and trends, or at clearly asserting them terminologically. Renaissance is certainly neither a movement nor a trend but a distinct period in the literary history. Metaphysical poetry, however, is first of all a trend that manifested itself only on the level of literary practice, but it is also a part of the larger period of English Renaissance.

Romanticism represents a period ('Romantic Period', or the 'Age of Romanticism', dated between the years of 1798 and 1824, or in more general terms between the last decades of the eighteenth-century and the first decades of the nineteenth-century) and at the same time Romanticism is a literary movement ('Romantic Movement', consisting of both imaginative writing and the doctrine, literary texts (such as ***Tintern Abbey*** by Wordsworth, or ***Kubla Khan*** by Coleridge) and the critical ideas (from Wordsworth's ***Preface to Lyrical Ballads***, for example, or Coleridge's ***Biographia Literaria***) about these texts).

In British literature, Neoclassicism is a period in literary history covering the last part of the seventeenth-century throughout the eighteenth-century; Neoclassicism is a movement in literature with its poetic works and a strongly normative and prescriptive doctrine; and also Neoclassicism is the creator of a particular trend in poetry, philosophical and satirical. Likewise, Modernism is a period in the first half of the twentieth-century, a complex artistic manifestation consisting of a number of distinct movements (Futurism, for example) and developing a number of trends in the production of literary texts (for instance, the 'stream-of-consciousness novel' of Marcel Proust and James Joyce).

A diachronic perspective on literature in Britain reveals a historical process that follows the general European pattern, yet in some moments having its particular manifestations. A special problem here is the establishment of some exact periods in the development of both British and world literature. In most general terms, literature is regarded as passing through three major periods: ancient, medieval and modern, whereas since the middle of the twentieth-century humanity is in the post-modern period, a period claimed to represent the transition to globalization. The first period in European literature is the classical period of ancient Greece and Rome, rejected and replaced by Middle Ages.

Concerning British literature in Middle Ages, historians have noticed the discrepancy between English and general world/European conditions: first, English literature does not have an ancient period, like Greece, Rome, Egypt, China, or India, and, second, its actual medieval period starts much later than the European one, which is the eleventh-/twelfth-century, for the simple reason that there was no English nation at all until that period.

It was the fifth-century that saw the invasion of the British islands by the Anglo-Saxon tribes coming from the Continent, which lasted for more than a century, and then the formation, the 'becoming' of these people as English for more than four centuries, which marked a period called in the history of English nation, language and literature as 'Anglo-Saxon' or 'Old English'. Conquered in their turn by the Normans in the eleventh-century, the newly formed English nation enters now 'officially' into Middle Ages that lasted for centuries until around 1500.

The medieval period is in its turn rejected and replaced by the age of Renaissance, which is considered either as the first part of the modern period that lasted until the middle of the twentieth-century, or as a period of transition from Middle Ages to modern period, now conceived as lasting

from the seventeenth-century Enlightenment to the middle of the twentieth-century. The art and literature of Renaissance already reveal the two contradictory but co-existing aspects of ‘innovation’ (for instance, sonnet in poetry) and ‘tradition’ (the revival of ancient models, as, for example, in Renaissance tragedy), and a more detailed consideration agrees that henceforth the growth of literature displays a rather complex picture.

The emergence of the innovative spirit in literature continues after Renaissance as the Baroque period (metaphysical poetry in English literature, also considered by some critics as the last manifestation of British Renaissance), but this cultural extravaganza is rejected and suppressed by the much stronger and dominant traditional element that, based on the revival of ancient classical artistic doctrine and practice, becomes itself a period and dominates as Enlightenment (or Neoclassicism in England) the entire social as well as cultural and literary background of Europe for more than one hundred years starting with the middle of the seventeenth-century.

By the middle of the eighteenth-century, the doctrine of Enlightenment/Neoclassicism is put into practice by the more pragmatic British mind, giving rise to Industrialisation and thus determining the decline and end of Neoclassicism as a distinct period. It is also the eighteenth-century that saw the rise of the novel in English literature, and by the middle of the period the rise of the pre-romantic poetry. As a rejection of Neoclassicism and the continuation of Pre-Romanticism, the Romanticism emerges at the end of the eighteenth-century reviving the innovative spirit in literature and breaking the linearity of literary development dominated for a long period after Renaissance by the traditional and normative principles of the revived ancient classical doctrine. Romanticism ends as a regular trend by the middle of the nineteenth-century, and henceforth in literature ‘tradition’ and ‘innovation’ co-exist again under different names and in the framework of different movements and trends.

In the simplest consideration of the facts, Romanticism gave in the second half of the nineteenth-century Symbolism, Aestheticism, Impressionism, Expressionism, and other manifestations of the artistic avant-gardism, which, in the first half of the twentieth-century, continue into a more complex range of experimental and innovative trends and movements (Surrealism, Dadaism, Cubism, 'stream-of-consciousness' novel, etc.) assembled and assigned together as Modernism, which in its turn continues in the second half of the twentieth-century as the innovation and experimentation of Post-Modernism – this is the component of 'innovation' in literary history, an evolutionary line having its origins in Renaissance, continued in Baroque, suppressed by classical tradition but revived by Romanticism, developed by late nineteenth-century avant-garde trends and diversified by the twentieth-century Modernism and Post-Modernism.

Some elements of the main 'enemy' of Romanticism, Neoclassicism, re-appear in the second half of the nineteenth-century in the system of the likewise conventional, normative and socially concerned Realism which emerges almost unchanged in its thematic and structural perspectives in the twentieth-century, opposing with its traditional realistic concern the innovatory and experimental art – this is the component of 'tradition' in literary history, an evolutionary line having its origins in ancient period, revived in Renaissance, changed, developed and institutionalised in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment/Neoclassicism, rejected and replaced by Romanticism but present again on the literary scene as the nineteenth-century Realism, and continued and diversified by the twentieth-century writers of social and realistic concern.

To summarise, every new literary period, movement, trend results in and rejects the previous ones on the basis of the opposition between normative tradition and experimental innovation. Tradition and innovation

are parts of a single process of literary change and development, contrary but interrelated, emerging in different periods under different names and in the system of different movements, trends and literary works, rejecting and succeeding each other, but from the second half of the nineteenth-century to the present day co-existing as two distinct dimensions of literature.

Concerning the major periods in the history of British literature, the standard opinion, originated in the nineteenth-century in relation to the development of English language, regards three periods: the period between 449/700 and 1100/1200 is called that of 'Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Literature', 'Middle Literature' between 1100/1200 and 1500, and the period from around 1500 till the second half of the twentieth-century is that of the 'Modern British Literature', followed by the 'Post-Modern Period'. A more suitable consideration divides British literature into (a) 'Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Literature', (b) 'The Middle Ages', (c) 'The Renaissance', (d) 'The Seventeenth-Century', (e) 'The Eighteenth-Century', (f) 'The Romantic Movement', (g) 'The Victorian Age', (h) 'The First Half of the Twentieth-Century', and (i) 'The Second Half of the Twentieth-Century'. A more recent consideration of the major periods in the history of British literature is provided by Andrew Sanders in ***A Short Oxford History of English Literature*** (2004), who divides English literary history into 'Old English Literature' (447-1066), 'Medieval Literature' (1066-1510), 'Renaissance and Reformation' (1510-1620), 'Revolution and Restoration' (1620-1690), 'Eighteenth-Century Literature' (1690-1780), 'The Literature of the Romantic Period' (1780-1830), 'High Victorian Literature' (1830-1880), 'Late Victorian and Edwardian Literature' (1880-1920), 'Modernism and Its Alternatives' (1920-1945), and 'Post-War and Post-Modern Literature' (1945-present).

Each of these periods – except, perhaps, the Old English period and Romanticism – has its own particular stages that correspond to specific sub-

periods, or movements, or trends, or major authors. Thus the medieval period of British literature covers Anglo-Norman literature, Geoffrey Chaucer and his epoch, and the fifteenth-century; Renaissance is divided in the period of Humanism and Elizabethan Age; the seventeenth-century includes metaphysical trend in poetry, the Puritan period, and the Restoration period; the eighteenth-century consists of Neoclassicism (Augustan Age), the rise of the English novel, and Pre-Romanticism; following the period of the Romantic Movement, the Victorian Age covers the literature of Realism, post-and neo-romantic writing, the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, and Aestheticism ('art for art's sake' doctrine); the twentieth-century includes, in the first half of the century, the Edwardian period, Modernism, and the new realistic writing, and, in the second half of the century, the Angry Generation and other manifestations of the traditional realistic writing, and the experimental post-modern literature.

Concerning the differences in the history of British and general European literary phenomena, it has been often brought into discussion the so-called 'complex of insularity' of the British cultural background, its strong regional and conservative features in relation to the rest of Europe. Throughout its history, British culture seems reluctant to accept the continental influences, new developments in literature and other arts, new movements, trends and styles, whose origins have been in France and Italy, and to a lesser extent in Spain and Germany. Hence the fact that English literature is a late phenomenon, from the very beginning and throughout its entire literary history. It may take a century or more to speak about English Renaissance or the consolidation of a literary tradition in English fiction, decades for Romanticism or Symbolism, as if British literary background must finally yield to the acceptance of what in contemporary Europe has been already established as a dominant literary tradition, movement or trend.

Still, many English authors on the side of the freedom of artistic expression remained for centuries unknown or wrongly evaluated, such as Donne and Hopkins, or, like Byron and Joyce, had to escape from the conservatism and reluctance of the fellow-citizens and produce their works in some other countries. It is claimed, however, that the English literary 'complex of insularity' ends with the synchronization in the first half of the twentieth-century of the British with European Modernism, due to the contribution of, among others, Joyce and Eliot, though in the second half of the last century English literature turns again to realistic and social concerns rather than literary experimentation, being traditional rather than innovative.

It might be that British literature has been in general traditional rather than innovative, but it passes nowadays, as many national literatures do, through a process of decentralization due to globalization, the country membership in European Union, new developments in sociology, anthropology, women's studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial and transnational studies. Perhaps the most significant factor of decentralization of British literature is the advancement of English as a world language, spoken worldwide by millions who have no other connection with Britain.

British literature might have been traditional rather than innovative, but it is an aberration to assume that it represents weak literary phenomena, lacking aesthetic strength and significance, and that it is investigated and taught merely because of some political, economic, colonial, postcolonial or linguistic causes. British literature is rich and complex, studied in almost every country of the world and acclaimed by Anglo-American as well as international scholarship, as to remember just Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian who, in their celebrated ***A Short History of English Literature*** (1929), saw English literature possessing "*a greater capacity than other literature for combining a love of concrete statement with a tendency to dream, a sense of reality with lyrical rapture*", and English writers

characterized by "*loving observation of Nature, by a talent for depicting strongly-marked character, and by a humour that is the amused and sympathetic noting of the contradictions of human nature and the odd aspects of life*".

British literature is an important part of the world literary heritage, answering and assuming during its history most of the innovation and development in arts and literature, and having its own contribution to world literary practice and literary doctrine, attributable to Chaucer in Middle Ages, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser and Sidney in Renaissance, Donne, Marvell, Milton and Dryden in the seventeenth-century, Pope, Swift, Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and Sterne in the eighteenth-century, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats in Romanticism, Dickens, George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, Tennyson, Robert Browning, Swinburne, Arnold, Ruskin, Pater, Wilde and Carlyle in Victorian Age, and, in the twentieth-century, Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, Shaw, Hughes, Beckett, Pinter, Golding, Murdoch, Fowles, Barnes, Mitchell, Spark, Lodge, Larkin, and many other writers of all these periods, whose works are landmarks in the history of British as well as European and world literature and thought. The argument to be considered in the field of literary studies dealing with the history of English literature is that the literary texts produced by different writers in different periods of British history and civilization are not merely a category that needs to be included in an overall literary system of English or international cultural heritage for the sake of rendering its completeness and aesthetic validity. It is rather that they are different in kind, unique and representative of a type of literary discourse that should be studied as a system in itself, and which, if properly comprehended, may perform the function of breaking down the existing views and theories about English literature in general or a particular literary manifestation in Britain, reorganizing them and suggesting new ones.

Following the principles announced by Tynyanov, the investigation of literary history is possible only in relation to *literature as a system, interrelated with other systems and conditioned by them*. Moreover, the study must move from constructional function (the interrelationship of each element with other elements of the system, and thus with the whole system of the literary work) to literary function (the interrelationship of a literary work with the literary order), and from literary function to verbal function (the interrelationship of a literary work with the social conventions), while clarifying the issue of the evolutionary interaction of functions and forms. In other words, the investigation of literature in its development must go from the literary system to the nearest correlated systems, such as social conventions, cultural doctrine, historical background, the author's psychology, daily life and personal experience, and the tastes and interests of the reading audience.

The study of literature may avoid any references to some distant systems, such as ethics and economy, but it must not ignore the importance of the private and social factors, as it is within this context that the literary significance of the work can be better clarified. The emphasis on historical dimension and the consideration of the social and biographical influences on the work must not exclude the synchronic dimension, the methodological principles and the scientific rigour of literary theory and criticism, which literary history has access to.

However, in the historical studies on British literature, or any national literature, or the history of world literature on the whole, it is clear that literary history, offering a historical vision on literature, is confronted by repeated methodological crises as this discipline is unable to fully synchronise itself with the innovations that constantly take place in modern literary theory and criticism. As Tynyanov has already warned on this matter, the historical investigation of literature might still have no clear

theoretical awareness of how to study a literary work or what the nature of its significance is.

Even so, there is no reason for the death verdict announced by so many concerning the future of literary history, as it would never be proved the fact that any literary work is not historically determined, or that no literary text is an expression of an epoch, or that its production has no connection to the individual experience of the author. It is an aberration to think that a literary work can be properly understood by some criteria lacking temporal significance, and it is rather normal to assume the effort of joining the synchronic and diachronic research, and to examine the literary work as projected on a diachronic scale, in relation to its past and contemporary perspective.

In this case, literary history assumes the effort of finding ways to innovate its discourse by getting support from other disciplines of humanities, such as cultural anthropology, social history, sociology, linguistics, and cultural studies, and especially from the most recent and world-wide acknowledged theoretical and critical modalities of the more adjacent to literary history domains of literary theory and literary criticism.

Possessing scientific consistency, literary history is expected to form together with literary theory and criticism a distinct unified discourse of aesthetic evaluation of the literary phenomena. If continuously and adequately modernized, this discourse would be efficient enough to sustain the proper study of national and international literary history, and even eliminate the general illiteracy caused by the deformed vision of the literary truths from the past. The books of imaginative writing might then remain an important stimulus for the aesthetic and intellectual needs of the humans despite the complexity of new cultural alternatives and the changing rhythm of the human existence at the beginning of a new millennium.

1

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Literature

Old English literature, which is also referred to as Anglo-Saxon literature, is commonly dated between 449/600 (invasion of Britain by Angles, Saxons, and Jutes) and 1100/1200 (establishment of the Norman rule). It is hypothesized that until the sixth-century BC the British islands were inhabited by Iberians and from sixth-/seventh-century BC by Celts. The year of 55 BC is that of the Roman invasion, and the years between 410 AD and 441 AD date the period of the Roman retreat. The year of 449 is the traditional date of the coming of the Germanic peoples from the Continent. Three Teutonic tribes, known as the Jutes, the Saxons, and the Angles, invaded the former Roman colony of Britain in an uncoordinated assault, successful only because of Celtic disunity. The invasion continued with irregular arrivals for a century and a half, until around 600. The Christianized during Roman rule Celtic inhabitants of Britain were driven by the newcomers westwards to Wales and Cornwall and northwards into the Highlands of Scotland, and gave modern Irish, Scottish and Welsh.

Angles, Saxons, and Jutes brought with them their paganism, traditions, and language (Anglo-Saxon, also referred to as Old English, with four dialects: Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish and West Saxon, the last one being the dialect of the best-known literature of that time), and embarked on the process of becoming a new nation, giving modern English. The Jutes set up an independent kingdom in Kent; the Saxons settled the area around the city of London and south of the Thames as far as Cornwall, hence the

modern Essex (East Saxons), Middlessex (Middle Saxons), and Sussex (South Saxons); the rest of central and northern part of England were inhabited by the Angles that gave the name of the country (Angle and land - England). Angles, Saxons and Jutes were themselves not unified, the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-century marking an age of intertribal conflict. It was in the ninth-century that Alfred, the only English ruler ever named 'the Great', unified during his reign (871-899) the Anglo-Saxon tribes and successfully struggled against the invading Danes.

The earliest production of English literature is directly linked to the Anglo-Saxon invasion of the British islands from the Continent and to the later process of (re-)Christianization which started at the end of the sixth-century, presumably with the mission of St Augustine (?-604), the first Archbishop of Canterbury, that arrived in Kent in 597. It is known that Pope Gregory the Great instituted missionary efforts for the conversion to Christianity of the Germanic tribes that had settled in Britain, after he had learned of some pagan Anglo-Saxon prisoners offered for sale in the slave market of Rome.

The Germanic invaders found in Britain a bleak and isolated land, where fighting, hunting and fishing became their main means of survival. Literature came to reflect the everyday events, mixing it with a vision of the mysterious and the fantastic, the dangerous and the horrible, to which later elements of the newly accepted Christian faith were added. Until Christianization, the Anglo-Saxons had no genuine form of complete writing, and their early culture on the Continent just modified some Latin letter symbols to use for inscriptions cut into stone, metal, or wood. These symbols are termed 'runes', originally meaning 'secret' or 'mysterious'. It was only after the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons that learning monks started compiling poems and prose works in written form. Culture, literature and learning flourished in monasteries, and, though much of the writing was

in Latin, around the year of 700 many Christian monks began writing in the vernacular language named 'Old English', often inserting in the Christian context of the texts many of their still strong pagan views.

The literature of the Anglo-Saxon period in Britain includes both verse and prose productions, where in point of literacy poetry being by far superior to prose. There are five distinct types of texts in Old English literature: lyric, epic, chronicles, didactic prose, and charms and riddles.

The period is commonly considered to have an earliest part in which poetry (***Beowulf***, ***The Seafarer***, ***Deor's Lament***) focused on the pagan life of the Germanic tribes, though already revealing some Christian elements. This earliest part of Old English period gave also poetry of a more emphatically Christian nature (Caedmon's ***Song***), some biblical paraphrases such as ***Genesis***, ***Exodus***, ***Daniel***, along with some religious narratives (***Christ***, ***Elene***, ***Andreas***), and the allegorical ***Phoenix***, translated from Latin.

In the ninth-century, especially under Alfred the Great, much literature in Latin, in particular prose, was translated into English (Pope Gregory's ***Pastoral Care***, Boethius' ***The Consolation of Philosophy***, Bede's ***Ecclesiastical History***), and the famous ***Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*** was revised and expanded.

In the tenth- and eleventh-century, a number of works emerged, such as the homilies, Biblical commentaries and hagiography of the abbot Aelfric of Eynsham (c.955-1010), known as the 'Grammarian', and the four Latin and twenty-two English sermons of the Archbishop Wulfstan (c.960-1023), known as the 'Homilist', to be distinguished from other several Wulfstans who were active in the tenth- and eleventh-century. The latter's most famous sermon is ***Sermo Lupi ad Anglos, quando Dani maxime persecuti sunt eos*** ('Sermon of the Wolf to the English, when the Danes Persecuted Them Most'), which expresses the author's deep sense of English identity as well

as the use of a pen-name, *Lupus* ('wolf'). Wulfstan is also the author of law-codes and a treatise on society, and is, with Aelfric, one of the two major vernacular prose writers of the later Anglo-Saxon period, whose writings are noted for their rich style, reflecting Latin models.

Other famous works of the period include the heroic poems ***Battle of Maldon*** and ***Battle of Brunanbury***, which represent late examples of Anglo-Saxon verse. Most critics agree that Old English literary production dates from the seventh- to late tenth-century, but most of the extant works are found in manuscripts dating from around 900 to around 1050 (the exact dates of the manuscripts are uncertain because of the nature of their oral transcriptions). It is also hypothesised that literature first flourished in Northumbria, but, during the reign of Alfred the Great, West Saxon became the cultural and literary centre of the Old English literary world.

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Poetry

Old English poetry includes the verse productions of two known poets (Caedmon and Cynewulf), some fragmented and anonymous lyric poems (***The Seafarer***, ***The Wanderer***, ***Deor's Lament***, and others), and a number of works survived as epic poetry (***Beowulf***) and heroic poems (***Battle of Maldon*** and ***Battle of Brunanbury***). Almost all extant Old English poetry exists actually in four manuscripts: the Exeter Book, the Junius Manuscript, the Vercelli Manuscript, and the ***Beowulf*** Manuscript. Much of the surviving lyric and epic poetry of Old English period includes fragments of some longer poems that have been lost and remain anonymous. Many of the lyric poems from this time, whose both authorship and date of composition are unknown, were found in one manuscript, the Exeter Book. All manuscripts date from around 1000 and are composed in the West Saxon

dialect; however, most critics find the texts to be from as early as the seventh-century to as late as the tenth-century.

Brought over by the Germanic tribes when they invaded Britain, the earliest Anglo-Saxon literature mirrored the life of the Germanic tribes while they lived on the Continent, being basically pagan, but soon incorporated certain Christian elements, was influenced by and adopted to the new historical conditions in Britain, and thus came to be considered English. The poems, songs, tales and other types of literature constituted the collective creation of the people and were unwritten since the pagan tradition forbade men to write them down. The texts were originally passed on orally from generation to generation by minstrels in their wanderings, who provided their own contribution to literary production. That is, since tales and songs were transmitted orally and the professional singers travelled from settlement to settlement, changes in form and content occurred depending on the preferences of particular audiences. In the earliest part of the Old English period, both lyric and epic sing of the life of the tribes at the time when the tribal system was already showing signs of disintegration but the poems still emphasize kinship, the peculiar feature of the tribal system, and point to a certain social stratification: the heroes belong to the rising tribal aristocracy, they are kings or chiefs surrounded by a group of formal warriors and courtiers that follow them in wars.

Gradually, the new feudal political structure emerges and is reflected in Old English verses, this time the land being ruled by a king whose lords and earls supervise the serfs who work for the king. Apart from glorifying the ruler, many of the tales and songs were produced in honour of those who showed courage in fight and offered survival lessons. Also much of both the lyric and epic is elegiac in tone, expressing grief for the fallen warriors and regret or nostalgia for the past glory. Intermingled in the poems are melancholy and the idea of peace, and the sombre atmosphere prevailing

in them is often increased by the almost poetic descriptions of the primitive nature of the Northern territory, and gradually they became more poetic and were meant to be recited as a form of public entertainment on the cold nights of the long British winters. In both epic and lyric poetry, the dominance of nature over human life and the harsh climate and ruthless conditions became some of the dominant themes that concluded in poetic glorification of any heroic action to defeat the obstacles, as well as in the idea of freedom, to which singers added in their travelling many of the local stories, legends and myths for greater flavour of the text, and as a consequence the greater fame and payment.

One of the few Old English lyrics that reflect upon nature more positively than other works is the poem entitled ***The Seafarer***, found in the Exeter Book. The form of the poem is a dialogue between an older seaman and a younger character that is eager to start his first experience on sea, and its structure also reveals two distinct parts, one didactic and the other descriptive. The poem suggests the fondness of the people toward the sea, and sings of the attraction coming from the sea that produces in man the desire to return to sailing adventures in spite of all the hardship and danger of the sea life, quite unknown to the lord in his comfortable castle.

The Seafarer also renders the themes of solitude and exile, similar to those of another Old English poem known as ***The Wanderer***. By its alienating vision, ***The Wanderer*** throws light on the close ties between the early feudal lord and his people. The narrator in the poem has lost the protective haven of his lord's hall and is now facing loneliness, exile, and a wasteland poetically rendered through metaphors and images of winter and the frozen sea. The narrator is a bard, an accomplished singer who has to start anew the only kind of activity he knows since the lord is dead and he wanders alone. The themes of estrangement and alienation point to the idea of mutability of human condition for the worse, as life, fame and material

things are transitory. The idea is rendered melancholically and nostalgically by the *ubi sunt* motif and the use of erotema:

> *Where is the horse gone? Where the rider?*
> *Where the giver of treasure?*
> *Where are the seats at the feast?*
> *Where are the revels in the hall?*
> *Alas for the bright cup!*
> *Alas for the mailed warrior!*
> *Alas for the splendour of the prince!*
> *How that time has passed away,*
> *dark under the cover of night,*
> *as if it had never been!*
> *Now there stands in the trace*
> *of the beloved troop*
> *a wall, wondrously high,*
> *wound round with serpents.*

In the same manner, expressing the theme of the failure of human relationships, another poem, known as ***Deor's Lament***, renders melancholically on the idea of an ephemeral life and the mutability of glory. Having no Christian elements at all, ***Deor's Lament*** is perhaps the first English lyric and certainly one of the most famous of the Anglo-Saxon literary heritage. It is probably as old as 500, although it appears around 800 in the Wessex dialect in the famous Exeter Book. Deor has been dismissed from the court of Heodenings and replaced in his king's favour by a rival poet; he describes his fallen state, recounting (from a German legend) in seven stanzas of varying length how other victims of misfortune have survived their troubles. The poet speaks imaginatively and certainly does not appear to be Deor himself; also, the poem is unique for its references to real historical figures, and may actually be a translation of an Old Norse text. The poem is also unique for its strophic form (six strophes) with a recurrent refrain, which is uncharacteristic of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Accepting the tragic situation and trying to balance the misfortune and the courage, the poet ends each stanza with the consolatory refrain (perhaps the earliest refrain in English literature): "*That sorrow passed, so may this*".

Other examples of the Old English lyric include ***The Ruin Burg***, describing the results of the devastations of a Roman settlement (probably the city of Bath) by the Saxons; ***The Wife's Complaint***, containing the pining after husband; and ***The Husband's Message***, in which an absent husband or lover inscribes a speech to his lady in wood, and the stick speaks the message to her, promising to rejoin her when the cuckoo is once more heard in spring, but this work is almost unique in Old English literature for its absence of melancholy.

Besides these more or less famous works of Old English poetry, many of them fragments of longer texts whose precise dating is difficult or impossible to make, there were some other anonymous Anglo-Saxon poems such as the charms and the riddles. The charms – consisting of the presentation of the means to be used in the implementation of the charm, a short story about how the problem appeared, and the actual incantation containing the technique needed to solve the problem – were extremely popular among the Anglo-Saxons in that they offered a link between two religious systems of belief, or rather exemplifying the transition from pagan superstition and thought to a Christian society (as in the 'Land Remedy' charm). The riddles are less literary than the charms, and more descriptive, and though many seem to have been translations from Latin, the poet employs the description to present the different aspects of the typical daily life in England. Many of the riddles are also descriptions of the various objects or phenomena, such as a sword, an iceberg, the storm, the fire, the sun. Meant to be an intellectual activity, the riddle may contain a didactic line, as in the 'Fire' riddle one is warned of the cruelty of fire to those who allow it to grow too strong and too proud.

Owing to Bede in his ***Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum***, the modern reader learns that first known poet in English language is Caedmon (?-680). Although Caedmon was styled as an unlearned "*cowherd of*

Whitby" who turned monk, he left a trend of religious poetry writing called the 'Caedmonian school' that refers to the poetic interpretations of the Biblical texts. Bede could only identify as definitely Caedmon's the poem ***Hymn of Creation***, but it is assumed that his other works are the ***Paraphrase***, ***Judith***, ***Genesis***, ***Exodus***, and ***The Temptation and the Fall of Man***. The ***Paraphrase*** opens with the famous ***Hymn***, a short poem that praises God as the Creator of all things, including Heaven and earth which will survive forever. The ***Paraphrase***, like other of Caedmon's works, is a poetic interpretation of the biblical texts, retelling the Genesis, Exodus, and a part of Daniel. The life of Caedmon the monk and the poet is known from ***The Story of Caedmon*** composed by Bede around 690, showing that Caedmon, an illiterate labourer of the monastery at Whitby, received in a dream the gift of writing poetry, and, addressing Hilda, the abbess at Whitby, he is urged by her to change his secular life for the monastic one.

Second poet of Anglo-Saxon literature is Cynewulf (or Cynwulf), who probably lived between 750 and 825, contributing to the literature of religious poetry in Northumbrian dialect. Cynewulf's life is absolutely unknown, and it is supposed that he was either a priest or a bishop, but he certainly was the first poet in English language to sign his works using both Roman cryptograms and runes: four Old English poems, ***Christ*** and ***Juliana*** in the Exeter Book and ***Fates of the Apostles*** and ***Elena*** in the Vercelli Book, bear a signature of his name. Cynewulf is probably also the author of such works as ***Andreas***, ***Phoenix***, and riddles.

Epic poetry of this period includes ***Beowulf*** (the greatest monument of Anglo-Saxon literature and the earliest fully rounded narrative work in verse among the Germanic people), some passages of lost poems – ***The Battle of Finnsburk*** and ***Waldhere*** (the former, unfortunately survived only in fifty lines, was composed as an epic lay, and the latter tells about Waldhere, son of a king of Aquitaine given up a prisoner to Othello) – and

two other epic/heroic poems, ***The Battle of Brunanbury*** and ***The Battle of Maldon***, which survived as being included in the ***Anglo-Saxon Chronicle***.

Beowulf

According to one theory, the epic is the product of the tribal system, emerging in ancient period from scattered episodes of different anonymous poets, which came to be moulded into one sequence of a single work. Against this theory of origins of the epic is the theory of a single-authorship, which considers the epic to be the literary product of a single genius. A number of epics challenges the consideration of the ancient period as the only historical background for the production of epics, as in Middle Ages (Old English ***Beowulf***, German ***Nibelungenlied***, French ***Song of Roland***, Spanish ***Cid***, Turkish ***Oghuz Khan***) or even in later periods (John Milton's ***Paradise Lost***) there was a great mass of literature referred to as 'epic' due to its similarities in form, content and purpose to the ancient pattern.

According to the ***Oxford English Dictionary***, the term 'epic' was for the first time used in English language in 1589, thus definitely no medieval writers would ever use this word, though they certainly had an idea about what this type of writing was. Of course, no medieval writer would know exactly the epic conventions and try to include them in his work. The creator of ***Beowulf*** had no intention to produce an epic; he was probably trying to narrate a heroic story with persons and events of legendary and mythic significance, and the result was the narrative verse of ***Beowulf***, which is referred to as epic.

Beowulf can be properly called an 'epic' because it fits the standard definition of the epic: a long narrative poem, oral or written, that presents the events and celebrates the adventures and achievements – important to

the mythology or history of a race, nation or society – of a central heroic figure of high position in that society and whose traits are exemplary and deeds are of great value, and both his traits and deeds are beneficial to that society. The epic is a literary narration, fictitious writing and product of the creative imagination; however, the epic, like ancient drama and other literary forms, reveals eternal and absolute truths, and thus, besides the historically defined thematic perspectives, the epic contains the mythic component, being the literary expression and provider of the myth. Moreover, the mythic narration contained in the epic is accepted as being true and an aspect of the sacred time, a fundamental story offering initiation in the framework of an altered situation.

In this respect, Mircea Eliade, in ***Aspects du mythe*** (1963), considers the myth to be at its origins a sacred history as well as "*a true history, given the fact that it always refers to certain realities*". The mythic narration expressed in the epic, or in other literary texts, represents a series of symbols that might be reduced to a permanent structure (as for Claude Levi-Strauss, among others); the mythic narration expresses the supernatural but also suggests the social context of a community, and thus the myth is reflexible on social level.

According to Olga Freidenberg, in ***Image and Concept: Mythopoetic Roots of Literature*** (1997), the community – ancient Greek, ancient Indian, or medieval Anglo-Saxon – inherits the mythic images and reifies them in literary texts at the historical moment of the transition from a mentality based on mythic images to a thinking based on formal-logical concepts, from a mythic thought to a conceptual one, where the epic stands as the intermediary factor between myth and tragedy, novel, and other literary forms (which, in other words, borrow the myth from epic), signifying the transition from the sacred to the profane and allowing the

change of the original mythic material or the creation of various versions, literary or literalised, of the original myth.

These and many other theories on myth represent the interpretative tool in the studies of ***Beowulf*** and other epics that consist of the mythic projection of human existence, and help identify their similarities as well as differences concerning both the thematic perspectives and structure.

Although ***Beowulf***'s structure may strike some readers as episodic when compared to the tighter narrative organization of ancient epics, the Anglo-Saxon epic poem shares with Homer's ***Iliad*** and ***Odyssey***, Virgil's ***Aeneid***, Babylonian ***Gilgamesh***, Indian ***Mahabharata*** and ***Ramayana*** certain similar characteristics, such as the figure of a hero of imposing status, and of great national and historical importance; the setting covering a number of nations; the action consisting of deeds of superhuman courage and great value having legendary national and international significance; supernatural forces involved in action as helpers but more commonly as opponents; an elevated and elaborate style and a measure of objectivity.

Richard McDonald in his study ***The Epic Genre and Medieval Epics*** (in ***Companion to Old and Middle English Literature***, 2002, edited by Laura Cooner Lambdin) provides a list of the main epic conventions:

- *Long narrative poem*
- *Hero of high position/ characters of high position*
- *Nationally or historically important episodes*
- *Events and persons of legendary significance*
- *A vast setting—a nation or the world*
- *Deeds of valor and courage*
- *A world-changing event*
- *Gods and demigods (supernatural forces)*
- *The arming of the warrior/ hero*
- *Ancestry of men and inanimate objects*
- *Allusions to stories, science, history, or cultural beliefs*
- *Topical digressions*
- *Epic similes*
- *Epic epithets or kennings*
- *Religious observances*

- *Lives of the gods*
- *Prophecies/ omens*
- *Descent into the underworld*
- *Elevated and majestic language and imagery*
- *Oral or literary formulation*
- *Begins in the middle, in medias res*
- *Epic question*
- *Wrath or guile*
- *Invocations*
- *Formal speeches and boasts*
- *Epic catalogs*
- *Dark humor; wry wit*

Although these conventions define the literary tradition of epic in general, and represent its most plausible features, each epic differs from others by what generic conventions it includes and how it deviates from the generally accepted conventions.

Beowulf is similar to other epics, sharing with them many of these features; however, given its status of a medieval epic belonging to the Anglo-Saxon tribes that were in a double transition – of becoming a new nation and of accepting a new religion – ***Beowulf*** significantly differs from the ancient Greek and Roman/Latin epics especially in matters of setting, supernatural forces, gods and demigods, the power of destiny or fate (here *wyrd*) and religious rituals. Differences can be also noticed on the structural level, as to mention just ***Beowulf*** being a relatively short epic with its 3,182 lines compared to more than 15,000 lines of the ***Iliad***; also, ***Beowulf***'s poetic form of alliterative verse is different from the ***Iliad***'s dactylic hexameter.

The framework of ***Beowulf*** consists of very old epic songs and stories of popular origin, which were later on enriched by diverse interpolations, most Christian, these stories broadening the context of the epic to a larger tradition and civilization. Even the setting in the epic is not Britain, but Denmark and the country of the Geats (Goths) in the South of

Sweden, and the hero himself is a Geat, yet what makes ***Beowulf*** an epic of the English nation is the language and the metrical form of the poem.

The basic thematic component in ***Beowulf*** is the fight between good and evil, between humanity and the destructive forces, as the main part of the narration represents the warrior hero's action, his deeds of uncommon courage. The poem is in fact constructed around three encounters with supernatural agencies embodied by monsters that intrude themselves into human community, aiming at undoing human order.

Thus ***Beowulf***, like many other sagas of popular origin, tells of the exploits of a mighty warrior who performs deeds of valour to save his people, humanity in general, from the destruction by supernatural forces. The first part relates Beowulf's exploits in his young days when he fought Grendel, a monster that for years had been harassing the country of the Danes and whom he kills in a hand-to-hand fight. This experience is followed by another fierce encounter with Grendel's mother, a water-witch, a she-monster, whom Beowulf kills in her cave at the bottom of the marshland. Back to his country, Geatland, Beowulf is elected king on his uncle's death.

The second part tells of another important deed, Beowulf's fight with a fire-spitting dragon, fifty years later, when he is already a very old man. Beowulf rids his country of the monster that has been laying waste of his kingdom, but not before the horrible creature sets his teeth in Beowulf's neck. Although leaving his realm threatened by neighbouring princes, the mortally wounded hero dies knowing to have laid down his life for the good of his people. The work fits in the general scheme of Old English poetry, remaining true to the code of *comitatus*, as Wiglaf, who accompanies Beowulf in his last fight, will continue as king the work of Beowulf and will rule the land in the same heroic way. The poem ends with an account of the

king's burial: his body is burnt on a pyre and his ashes are buried in the ground by the sea.

Beowulf has come down to us in a manuscript, partially damaged by fire, dating from the tenth-century, the work of one or two unknown monastic scribes or copyists who transcribed it into West Saxon dialect, but archaisms and dialectal forms point to an earlier composition: end of the seventh- or beginning of the eighth-century. It has been long held the opinion that the poem is a pre-Christian composition, the paganism of which being somehow tampered by the copyists in order to give an acceptably Christian frame of reference to the text, and that the tenth-century manuscript of the poem may postdate its composition by as much as three or even four hundred years.

As an oral work, ***Beowulf*** was composed to be sung, and the poem evolved over a long period of time with many changes based on the audience and the purpose of retelling. The audience listening to the story was in transition from the pagan outlook to the Christian belief, and the examination of the text may reveal the fact that somewhere late in its existence the poem became 'Christianized' in that new elements of Christianity and didactic messages were introduced over the originally pagan text.

The debates around the date of its composition are actually closely linked to the revealing of pagan and Christian elements in the poem. The pagan elements are numerous: the dead are cremated, sacrifices are made at the temple of idols, Beowulf uses a sword forged by supernatural creatures, the giants, and the hero himself seems to be somewhat more than human as, for instance, he is able to stay under water for a long time. Also, omens and prophesies are observed to direct human conduct, and even the death of Beowulf becomes a prophetic omen foretelling the destruction of the Geatish nation.

Other thematic aspects that look to a heathen, pagan past are the praise of worldly glory, the theme of blood vengeance, and the frequent references to the power of *wyrd* ('fate'). In the transition from the pagan outlook to the Christian belief the pagan gods and demigods are no longer worshiped and Christianity not yet validated, but the pagan concept of fate still remains the controlling force of the human life, the *wyrd* that "*often saves an undoomed man when his courage is strong*".

Moreover, Beowulf's struggle with the supernatural agencies suggests the pagan tribal awareness of the clash between the bounded by loyalty human community around the protective lord and the insecure, untamed world of beasts, wilderness, natural forces, as the dragon denotes the destructive power of fire, Grendel's mother that of water, and Grendel that of the earth itself. It is also the conflict between settled and unsettled culture, between a stable agricultural society and one of migration, bound around a wandering hero. The anonymous poet-narrator recognizes that his story is a pagan one, which looks back at an old age, and that his characters hold to pagan virtues and to a pre-Christian world-view. Nonetheless, the poet shows knowledge of the terminology from the Christian Scriptures and is aware that the older concepts of heroism and heroic action can be viewed as compatible with the new Christian religious and moral values.

The poet contrasts the benevolent and almighty God and His grace to the blind and hostile *wyrd*, and suggests that the man should have faith only in God. The poet contrasts the warmth and comradeship of the humans (social life) to the bleak and unfriendly world of the monsters (alien world) as the struggle between good and evil.

These implicit Christian elements are enhanced by the praise of the virtues of moderation, unselfishness, service to others, which can be noticed in the final tribute offered to the dead Beowulf by his warriors who celebrate his sacrifice. One should take into consideration the fact that

Beowulf himself acts like Christ figure in redeeming the world and laying down his life for the good of the people, even if the poet does not provide any explicit references to this aspect. But Grendel, the first monster of the poem, is seen as "*Godes andsaca*", the enemy of God, and as a descendant of the Biblical Cain, the first murderer; also, the text contains a discussion of the Flood. Except a song of creation, completely absent are any explicit references to Christ, the cross, angels, saints, and it is extremely difficult to imagine a Christian work of almost the Middle Ages ignoring all of these.

It seems, reasons Andrew Sanders, that the "*poem's original audience must have shared this mixed culture, one which readily responded to references to an ancestral world and one which also recognized the relevance of primitive heroism to a Christian society*."

On the other hand, Michael Alexander, one of the best translators into Modern English and commentators of the epic, says: "*Unlike his heroes, the poet is a Christian, and the cosmology and eticology are largely Christianized. A typical Anglo-Saxon moralist, his traditional gnomic gravity and wryness are modified in places by a Christian note of agonized moral and spiritual concern such as we find in the homilies of the time. Where his voice is heard, the poet makes* ***Beowulf****Ошибка! Закладка не определена. more of an elegy than a celebration of heroic life, partly because he laments the passing of the heroic virtues of his martial ancestors, partly because he has a horror of war such as fight be felt in a settled community in an insecure age. Education he contributed a conscious eloquence and fullness to the epic style which perhaps comes in part from an acquaintance with Latin rhetoric. But if the* ***Beowulf*** *poet, in making the* ***Beowulf*** *story into a poem, has deepened it, shaped it and softened it, his consciousness still operates quite naturally in the categories and procedures of the epic tradition. The significance and weight of* ***Beowulf*** *lies primarily in the logic of the story and the nature of the style, both traditional, and not*

in the comments of the poet. Certainly, the moral perspective and an almost Virgilian quality in some of the sentiment cannot be unconnected with Christianity: the audience of eighth-century ***Beowulf*** *had heard sermons and looked back upon the Age of Migration as their heroic age. To a literate consciousness deepened by Christianity, the heroic world of these heathen ancestors must have seemed doubly tragic*."

The author of the epic proved a poet deeply conversant with the art of verse-making, a skilful poet in the narrative episodes, the lofty speeches of the heroes, the descriptive passages of impressive lyrical beauty. The pattern of the Anglo-Saxon verse is based on a strongly marked accent and on alliteration, and there is no end-rhyme and no definite number of syllables in each line. A caesura divides it into two approximately equal half-lines with two stressed syllables in each half-line, and the consonant in the first stressed syllable of the second half-line provides the alliteration for the whole. Yet the dignity and the poetic quality of the style are enhanced by the remarkable handling of metaphors and epithets, especially by the poet's use of a considerable number of compound metaphors – the kennings (periphrastic expressions, figures of speech using description) – characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon language: for instance, the "*swan's riding*" and "*the whale-road*" for the sea, "*the sky's candle*" and "*heaven's jewel*" for the sun, the battle becomes "*the sword-play*", the sword is a "*battle-friend*", the dragon is the "*night's alone-flier*", etc.

Beowulf is, not just in Old English, but in any Teutonic language, the oldest complete epic. The poem displays the familiar epic qualities: extended narrative, majestic tone, the hero who performs superhuman deeds and fights against enemies, preventing the intervention of supernatural agencies that might intrude in the life of the community and initiate destruction. Beowulf is honoured as a selfless hero and leader who serves

his people by saving them from monsters, but the welfare of community depends also upon the loyalty of all its members to the leader.

Beowulf is the idealized warrior of a heroic age and the paradigm of what Anglo-Saxons chiefly admired as masculine qualities. Beowulf displays courage and integrity. He is fearless but not foolhardy, uncomplicated but intelligent, serious but not dull. He is thoroughly adjusted in mind and body to a soldierly code, to a life by the sword, haunted by the awareness of an ancestral inheritance, a 'kill and get killed' expectancy, submitted to *wyrd*, but also revealing a heroic submission to the will of a just God. His essentially pessimistic view on life is reinforced by the author of the work with nature scenes of sombre significance.

Ironically, the first great work of English literature is set entirely in Scandinavia, without any mention of England or the Anglo-Saxons, or the English, yet it is considered the very first great masterpiece of English literature. The text might have been originally the product of a different, Scandinavian background, but, according to the theory of the epic as the product and expression of the tribal system, ***Beowulf*** the epic had 'migrated' south and found in the Anglo-Saxon tribal system of Britain the congenial background for its existence, changed and modelled itself according to this background, and came to express the values and beliefs of this background, thus becoming the national epic of a different population, itself in the process of becoming a new nation, that is the English one.

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Prose

Old English prose texts and Christian epics were largely written in Latin and are to a great extent attributed to Bishop Aldhelm (650-709), who wrote riddles and letters, to Bede/Baeda (672?-735), and to Alfred the Great

(c.848-899). Bede, the author of 25 books, among which ***De Natura Rerum***, ***Art of Poesry***, and his most important and famous ***Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*** (‘The Ecclesiastical History of the English People/Nation’, in five books, completed in 731), was named the ‘Venerable Bede’ for his piety and scholarship.

One of the leading European scholars of his period, and perhaps the first English professional scholar, Bede is the ‘Father of English Learning’, encyclopaedic in his knowledge, conversant in Greek and Latin, and probably Hebrew; he is “*the candle sent by God to illuminate the Church*”, says Dante through St Bonifacius in ***Divine Comedy***. Bede is also the first Anglo-Saxon historian, the ‘Father of English History’, and his ***Ecclesiastical History of the English People*** is the main source of our knowledge of Old English people.

In Bede’s presentation of events, miraculous events play a certain part, but his acceptance of miracles comes mostly from the general condition of the European culture of his times, and less due to his own beliefs. Bede’s style is direct and forceful; his popularity is immediate and wide-spread. Above all, as a scholar, Bede anticipates the modern practice in wide examination and specification of sources, and he is a true historian his age could possibly produce. Bede cited many of his sources, which include the written works he could find, oral traditions and eyewitnesses. Bede is the major source for English history from 597 to 731, and, before Alfred the Great, he produced the greatest history ever written by an Englishman. The importance of the ***Ecclesiastical History*** is not just its sombre account of the historical events, but also the fact that these events go as back as the ancient times of Britain with the Roman Caesar’s invasion. After Bede’s death in 735, his work was continued by other monks.

The ‘Father of English Prose’, however, is to be considered Alfred the Great, the king who united the West Saxons, successfully opposed the

Viking invasion, and gave his name to an epoch: the 'Age of Alfred the Great', covering the second half of the ninth-century. During the ninth-century the Vikings, coming out of wild mountains and waste lands of Scandinavia, and even wilder than the Anglo-Saxons, almost conquered the world. Alfred, the Anglo-Saxon king of Wessex, in one of the greatest military campaigns ever, struggled to victory over terrifying Vikings, winning at Athandum one of the most important battles ever fought on English soil, in the end demanding at the Treaty at Wedmore half of England and imposing Christianization of his Danish adversaries. Alfred, truly the Great, was now the first ruler of all free Englishmen, although his domain was limited to his own Wessex, little Kent and half of Mercia. He rebuilt and repopulated the devastated cities, among which London, and presumably established up to 45 cities, among which Oxford. He founded schools, compiled laws, and reformed the justice, but Alfred's true greatness lies in the restoration of learning and arts.

The period is a landmark in the history of English nation, culture and literature also because Alfred initiated the ***Anglo-Saxon Chronicle***, written in the native language not Latin, and perhaps no other nation in the world during the ninth- to twelfth-century possessed such a relatively complete and revealing record of its history as this one.

Perhaps the most educated ruler of his period, Alfred's first merit is the translation into Anglo-Saxon (more precisely, into the dialect of the West Saxons) of a number of Latin works, among which Pope Gregory's (c.540-604) ***Liber Pastoralis*** ('Pastoral Care'), Bede's ***Ecclesiastical History***, the historian and theologian Orosius' (c.385-420) ***World History***, and the Roman philosopher and statesman Boethius' (c.475-525) ***The Consolation of Philosophy***.

Alfred's greatest achievement, as it is assumed, is that he has directed the starting of the famous ***Anglo-Saxon Chronicle***, which is the

first historical record of the British in English language, covering the history of Britain from its pagan times to 1154. Since Alfred died around 899, the chronicle had three additions to the original text: one for the years of 894-924, another for the period 925-975, and another for the period 983-1018, and the writing continued until the Norman invasion. Although a historical record, there are literary texts embedded in the chronicle, of which the most famous ones are the heroic poems ***The Battle of Brunanbury*** and ***The Battle of Maldon***, the latter based on a real historical event that took place in 991. The former was probably composed around 937 as it was found under this year in the ***Anglo-Saxon Chronicle***.

Without any Christian element in it, ***The Battle of Brunanbury*** (***Brunanburgh***) has the form of an action adventure story about heroes, fighting and battles with decimated enemies. Exhibiting a sombre tone, the poem expresses the theme of heroism on some historical basis, glorifying the great victory of Aethelstan and Edmund, the King Alfred's heirs, over the army of invaders – a combined force of Irish, Danes and Scots – who were massacred by the English, and in the end of the poem it is mentioned that there has never been such a slaughter on the island.

The Battle of Maldon also refers to the heroic resistance to foreign invasion, this time glorifying the heroic deeds of Earl of Byrhtnoth against the Viking invaders led by Anlaf. Although the earl is killed by a poisoned spear, as many of his relatives, friends and warriors are, and the enemy takes advantage after the earl's mistake of allowing the Vikings to cross the bridge on overestimating his own strength, the English people, led by the brave Godric and motivated by the valour of the dead leaders and fellow-warriors, begin an attack against the enemy. The code of *comitatus* in the general scheme of Old English poetry is nuanced here by the theme of heroism in facing the defeat and by the Germanic emphasis on the importance of loyalty to one's lord.

The two heroic poems embedded in the chronicle, as well as the other literary texts, and especially the historical recording that represents the essence and the main part of the chronicle, confer to ***Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*** the status of the most important work in prose in Old English, which demonstrates in its eleventh- and twelfth-century the slow shift from Old English to Middle English

2

Medieval Literature

Medieval English literature is commonly dated between 1100/1200 and 1500, or more precisely between 1066 (Battle of Hastings) and 1509 (death of Henry VII and accession of Henry VIII).

Middle Ages to early Renaissance in English history is a period of military struggle, political and religious unrest, increasing nationalistic spirit and the consolidation of a national identity in social affairs, politics, religion, language, arts. The year of 1066 marked the beginning of a new period as it was the year of some crucial events for the further historical development in Britain: the death of Edward the Confessor and the accession of Harold Hardrada to the throne, Harold's defeat at the Battle of Stamford Bridge, followed by the Battle of Hastings and as the result William of Normandy becomes King of England. William was a harsh king towards his subjects, militarily annihilating the opposition, levying heavy taxes, and confiscating the country's land, of which retaining one-six for himself and granting one-half to loyal Normans, but also allowing the church retain its own lands. The Norman Conquest led to the unification of England, established a global economy, and offered to the conquered country new commercial, religious, political and cultural relations with the Continent. Thus the Norman influence – that lasted until the fourteenth-century – affected England socially, politically, and culturally, and led to the establishment of a feudal society, the actual Middle Ages in England.

Following the Hastings battle, the Norman Conquest is further extended in 1169 when Norman Barons invade Ireland. Before that, England saw the Cluniac reforms and the appointment of Lanfranc as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1070, and the reign of William's son Henry I. During Henry I's reign, England had a period of peace and prosperity, sport and nobility, but also a period of the church's efforts to increase its power. It was a period when conventions of knighthood were firmly embedded, including to serve the lords and dedicate the quests to a lady. With the accession of Henry II to the throne in 1154 there emerged the conflict between the king and the church due to the monarch's radical legal reforms. Henry II was followed by Richard I (1189-1199), who initiated the Third Crusade, and King John (1199-1216). The main historical events during the reign of John were the Loss of Normandy in 1204, the rising conflict between the king and the nobles who eventually were victorious, the result being the Magna Carta of 1215 and the development of Parliament, itself the source of later conflicts.

Other important events in English medieval history include the arrival of Franciscan and Dominican monks in England in 1221; the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314; accession of Edward III in 1327, his death in 1377, when Richard II succeeds to the throne; the beginning of the Hundred Year War in 1337, when Edward III declared war on France; the Battle of Crecy in 1346; the Black Death (1348-1350); the Peasants' Revolt in 1381; accession of Henry IV in 1399, his death in 1413, and accession of Henry V in the same year; death of Henry V and accession of the infant Henry VI in 1422; the Battle of Castillon and the loss of all English possessions in France, except for Calais, a northern French port, in 1453, which marked the end of the Hundred Year War (1337-1453); the beginning of the Wars of the Roses in 1455, which was between Lancaster (or 'Lancastrians', loyal to Henry VI) and York (or 'Yorkists', supporters of the duke of York), and by which the entire fifteenth-century was torn; deposition of Henry VI in 1461,

when Edward IV is proclaimed king; restoration of Henry VI in 1470 and his murder in 1471, when Edward IV regains the throne; death of Edward IV, accession and murder of Edward V, and accession of Richard III in 1483; death of Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth and accession of Henry VII in 1485, by which English history saw the establishment of the Tudor dynasty; and death of Henry VII and accession of Henry VIII in 1509. The establishment of the Tudor dynasty offered to England a period of internal peace, and the last decades of the fifteenth-century already showed traces of Humanism and early Renaissance.

Middle Ages to early Renaissance in English art and literature is a period based on the view that the human and natural worlds are divinely determined and are interrelated in the scheme of mystical and sacred things the human being must aspire to (the idea is expressed in, among others, William Langland's ***Piers Plowman***). More often, however, the medieval writer is torn between, or rather interconnects, the divine and the secular, the sacred and the profane, religious authority and human will, doctrine and originality, ideology and creativity, didacticism and self-expression (this situation is better revealed in romances and in Chaucer's ***The Canterbury Tales***).

Medieval English literature is diachronically conceived in three major periods, each representing a distinct phase in the whole history of English literature. The first one followed the Norman Conquest that provided the replacement of an English-speaking ruling class by a French-speaking one, and offered to English writing French models to be followed, and is commonly referred to as 'The Anglo-Norman Literature'.

The second period originated roughly around 1350 in the supplanting of French by Middle English as the language of court, which gave among other things the appearance of definitely English writings, and which is commonly referred to as 'The Age of Chaucer'.

The third period, which is referred to as just 'The Fifteenth-Century', is a weak literary age when compared to the previous two ones, and especially to that of Geoffrey Chaucer and his epoch, although towards its end England possessed a language close to Modern English and its literature a strong dramatic tradition.

Medieval English literature was a period of prose and poetry, literary history adding to these two already established genres the third one, which is drama. The prose of medieval English literature receives its distinction from the writing of chronicles and prose romances, John Wycliffe's sermons and translation of the Bible, Sir John Mandeville's travel book, and Sir Thomas Malory's ***Morte d'Arthur***.

In poetry it was the period of metrical romances, Chaucer's ***The Canterbury Tales***, Gower's ***Confessio Amantis***, and such poetry as William Langland's ***The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman***. Medieval poetry flourished in Chaucerian period between 1350 and 1400, whereas in the fifteenth-century, along with some imitations of Chaucer, English literature had Lydgate, Hoccleve, and popular ballads.

Concerning medieval drama, there were the great cycles of mystery plays that flourished first, followed by morality plays, and the appearance of the interlude in the last years of the fifteenth-century, the last decades of the fifteenth-century English literature already showing the existence of a strongly secularised dramatic tradition.

The Anglo-Norman Literature

The Norman Conquest put an end to serious literary works in Old English language and gave the rise to Anglo-Norman literature, commonly dated between 1100/1200 and 1350s, and considered to be the first phase in

the development of English literary phenomena during the Middle Ages. The starting point is taken to be the Hastings Battle of 1066, marking the beginning of the Norman Conquest, and for almost two centuries the further development of English society, culture, and literature was dependent on French politics, French culture, French literary productions, and French language.

The conquered island spoke the Old English in three distinct forms – West Saxon in the south, Northumbrian in the north, and Mercian in the Midlands – and the French. The vernacular Old English was the language of the oppressed Saxons, which soon, in its natural progression, integrated French words, lost its forms, and the Mercian, covering London, the capital and the place of government, and Oxford, the centre of learning, became the standard language and spread throughout the country. The French was the language of the court, transactions, public documents, and literary works.

The period gave a number of chroniclers, among whom William of Malmesbury (c.1080/1095-1143), who wrote around 1120 ***Gesta Regum Anglorum*** ('Deeds of the Kings of England'), covering the period of 449-1127; Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100-1155), the author of another Latin work – ***Historia Regum Britanniae*** ('The History of the Kings of Britain', c.1136) – and the founder of the Arthurian legend; Matthew Paris (c.1200-1259), who wrote ***Chronica Majora***, about England and Continent, starting from 1235, and ***Chronica Minora***, about England between 1200 and 1250.

Besides chronicles, the prose of the Anglo-Norman period gave at the beginning of the thirteenth-century ***The Ancren Riwle*** ('The Anchoresses' Rule'), written in Old English. Roger Bacon (c.1214-1294) produced, sometime around 1250, his philosophical writings ***Opus Majus*** (dealing with the relationship between philosophy and theology), ***Opus Minus*** (a continuation of the previous, to which a discussion on the faulty interpretation of the Bible is included), and ***Opus Tertium*** (a scientific work).

The poetry of the time includes ***Ormulum*** (c.1180) by Orm, the early thirteenth-century ***Brut*** (c.1215) by Layamon, ***Bestiary*** (anonymous authorship), ***Poema Morala*** ('Moral Ode', c.1200), ***The Cuckoo Song*** (the oldest known English folk poem, dating from the thirteenth-century), ***The Owl and the Nightingale*** (c.1250), and others.

Towering over the entire period is the medieval romance (also referred to as chivalrous romance, Arthurian legend, metrical romance, or prose romance), which represents a remarkable sequence of European literary tradition in Middle Ages, being extremely popular in Western Europe, comparable with novel in modern period.

Romances are extended narratives concerning the adventure, usually quest or test, of a noble knight, frequently idealized, sometimes accompanied by his squire or a lady, and who, with the clear demarcation of good and evil, displays knightly honour and ethical principles and in whose action the supernatural is often involved.

The didactic function of the romances allows no moral ambiguity, and the stories frequently contain ethical lessons based on good-evil dichotomy and courtly traditions with ideals embodied by stereotypic heroes and ideas presented by stereotypic situations. The didactic purpose of the romance focuses on feudal duties, social and courtly values, but in spite of some historic or pseudo-historic material presented in the narrative, a romance is not history, and the deeds of the knights are neither credible nor realistic, though the hero remains involved in courtly situations.

The courtly aspect of the romance gave idealised, yet also violent and often adulterous heroes, celebrating their success in overcoming the obstacles and making possible the triumph of the good. The courtly component of the romance co-existed with the learned traditions, the popular, and the religious, the last aspect being better revealed by attempts of the church to respond to the popularity of the romance by developing its

own romances, termed 'romantic hagiographies', such as the stories about Amis and Amiloun or about the Grail, which would give a more wholesome and didactic entertainment.

However, the didactic purpose of the romance remains on the whole an expression of the courtly culture, and the courtly subject matter of the romance, according to Carolyn Craft in ***Romance*** (in ***Companion to Old and Middle English Literature***, 2002, edited by Laura Cooner Lambdin), involves a number of frequent motifs such as "*the distressed damsel, the evil challenger, the fair unknown, the knight of unusual prowess, the power of love that enables overcoming otherwise insurmountable obstacles, or the enchantment that must be removed by a feat performed only by the hero*".

The romance was brought to Britain in a cross-cultural interaction following the Norman Conquest, and whose originally French textual features were borrowed and imitated; in particular, the thematic features of love and adventure, exaltation of women and the code of chivalry that came to replace the sombre brutality and harsh tone of the Anglo-Saxon literature.

The literary reception of the French material in English literature goes beyond simple imitation, and produces in English as early as the thirteenth-century original works: verse and prose narratives of adventure about King Arthur, Sir Gawain, Lancelot, other heroes, kings, knights, ladies, whose action is motivated by either desire for adventure, or journey to accomplish some goal (search, quest, rescue, fight), or love, or religious faith. In particular, the most famous in Britain were the tales in verse form about King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

One possible answer to the questions of what is a medieval romance and what are its defining features is given by the anonymous writer of the best known and most popular of English medieval romances, which is ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***. The description of chivalry provided here by the Lady of Hautdesert addressing Gawain refers clearly to the stories

about knights, thus being also a description of the medieval chivalric romance:

> *And in the whole of chivalry, the thing most praised*
> *Is the loyal pursuit of love, the code of warfare;*
> *For, to speak of the endeavours of true knights,*
> *It is the title and text of their works,*
> *How lords have ventured their lives for their true loves,*
> *Suffered dreadful hardships for the sake of their love,*
> *And afterward avenged themselves through their valour and dispelled their pain,*
> *And brought bliss into their* [the ladies'] *chamber with*
> *their* [the knights'] *achievements.*

The medieval romance as a literary genre starts from French Chretien de Troyes (second half of the twelfth-century), whose romances, among other French creations of this type, spread to other countries as well as England and were imitated there. The romance was written or oral, in verse or prose, and most of its content, including English Arthurian material, is pure medieval fiction, although critics hypothesise some historical basis for it. Hence the division of its material into 'Matter of France' (based on *chansons de geste*, and containing Charlemagne legends), 'Matter of Britain' (based on Celtic oral tradition, and containing the Arthurian legends), and 'Matter of Greece and Rome' (drawn from ancient history and literature, and containing tales about Alexander the Great, and the fall of Troy and its consequences, or romances based on other classical stories from the Mediterranean area, such as those dealing with the Thebes, of which an example would be Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale').

In English literature, the founder of the Arthurian romances is Geoffrey of Monmouth in his written in Latin ***Historia Regum Britanniae***. Geoffrey of Monmouth claimed to use an old Anglo-Saxon verse that helped him to relate the Arthurian legend, but the existence of such a source was doubted by many historians. Geoffrey of Monmouth is important for the consolidation of romance in Britain as a literary tradition by changing Arthur the legend into Arthur the character, by imposing upon him the

Christian elements, and, in general, by making dominant the themes of love, adventure, and chivalric conduct. The literature of the later periods owes to Geoffrey of Monmouth other 'gifts', as to mention just the fact that in his work the first known story of King Lear is to be found.

Medieval romances display a number of characteristics that correspond to certain defining features of the ancient epics, among which verse form, extended narration, extraordinary events involving outstanding characters, supernatural element, and others. According to Mikhail Bakhtin's study ***Formy vremeny y hronotopa v romane*** (in ***Voprosy literatury i estetiki***, [1937-8] 1975), romances are influenced by the 'novel of travel or wandering' of Antiquity, and they continue the ancient 'novel of trial and ordeal' with its static protagonists whose features are tested, to which the concern with Christian and chivalric values is added. Romances continue also the ancient narrative with its adventurous time, to which a 'fabulous time' is added as a result of the influence by native folk or oriental tales, making possible a clear deviation from the normal time category. Moreover, the medieval romance replaces the heroic age of the epic with a chivalric one, the tragic seriousness with light-hearted mystery and fantasy, the solid narrative unity with a loose structure, the pure physical action with a combination of deed and love, the dramatic mode involving characters that speak for themselves with a narrative one in which the voice of the narrator is a distinct presence.

Although having certain characteristics similar to those of the ancient epic, the romance is not a direct continuation of the literary tradition of ancient epic writing. Still, out of the two main thematic elements of the medieval romance – physical action and love – the former emerges from an epic tradition, which is the chivalric military ideals of the older *chanson de geste* ('song of great deeds'), an early French epic form, of which the best example is ***Chanson de Roland*** (c.1100). The latter thematic component of

the romance, which is love, or rather the delicate nuances of feeling in general, is deeply rooted in the lyrics of the troubadours, with their interest in the daily life of the castles, their intense passion addressed to a lady, making her sole inspirer of all that is good in her lover. In the lyrics of the troubadours and in romances, the worship and adoration of women were mixed with the cult of the Virgin Mary as a part of the medieval religious fervour. The woman was idealized as a superior being yet unapproachable, but the poet would often lay emphasis also on the extra-marital tie between men and women, thus the romantic love being adulterous.

Out of the combination of these two thematic perspectives – love and adventure – romances emerged in the twelfth-century as long romantic verse narratives that were composed in Central and Northern France, in the French of England, and later in English and in prose. The stories were called romances because they were first cultivated in a Romance language (French) as contrasted to Latin. Very soon the word 'romance' assumed the sense of unreal fantasy in story form, with love as main motive and chivalric persons as main characters.

Following the medieval period, the two major thematic components of one literary system diverge into other literary patterns, the word 'romance' giving in many European languages the noun 'roman' ('novel', in English) to name a new literary tradition that preserves from romance the narrative element (the story as a sequence of events, characters, narrator, point of view, etc.) and excludes the verse form and the fantastic element that are replaced by the prose form and the realistic element, respectively. The word 'romance' also gave the adjective 'romantic', referring to the late eighteenth-century and the early nineteenth-century age of Romanticism (Romantic Movement), this time due to the similar in romance and romantic poetry supreme emphasis on love, feeling, imagination, fantasy, and a special attention given to the psychological treatment of the character.

In medieval England romances were at first cultivated in Anglo-French language under the direct patronage of Queen Eleonor of Aquitaine. One of the first works is claimed to be ***Roman de Troie*** (c.1160), written by a certain cleric named Benoit de Sainte Maure, the text containing a long romanticized account of the Trojan war, which inserted a new story of a secret, chivalrous love connecting Prince Troilus and a Trojan lady Briseida.

The most important step in the rise of the romance is provided by the interest of the writers in romanticized history, especially in the legend of King Arthur, which is expressed, for instance, in French ***Roman de Brut*** by Wace (c.1115-1183) and its later (following 1200) English version by Layamon (the author of a voluminous, 16000 lines, poem entitled ***Brut*** and based on Wace's text. Wace himself bases his work on Geoffrey of Monmouth's ***Historia Regum Britanniae***, and he narrates the founding of Britain by Brutus of Troy to the end of the legendary British history created by Monmouth. Another interest is in the short *lai* depicting a single adventure as a closely connected series of events, focused on a single problem of courtly behaviour, which are also generally about the Arthurian knights and their ladies. Not all of the romances composed in Anglo-French concern King Arthur and his knights, as some of them – ***Horn et Rimel*** (c.1180) and ***Haveloc*** (c.1190), and their later versions, for example – deal with princes exiled from their patrimony, who regain it by deeds of arms. Such romances demonstrate the interest of the French-speaking British aristocracy in the native materials, settings and themes.

However, very much of the medieval English romance (the 'Matter of Britain') uses the court of King Arthur as a background. It has been said that such romances are rooted in the fabled tales about Celtic resistance to the Saxons in the sixth-century, a resistance led by a prince of imperial authority, later associated with the legendary exploits of the mythological King Arthur. The heroes are Knights of the Round Table, who spend much

time and energy rescuing ladies from dangers such as capture, siege and oppression, and preventing attacks by robbers, incursions by monsters or the evil doings by magicians. The rescuers perform all sorts of services, and patiently endure whatever trials or humiliations the ladies impose upon them.

When compared to French models, English romances show less artistry, less sophistication, and are less interested in the service of ladies than in pure adventures; they lay emphasis less on inner conflict and delicate nuances of feeling than on credulity of physical action. They were imitating French plots and adopting French verse form, which, in turn, supplied the greatest number of their plots, whether directly or indirectly, from sources ultimately ancient classical, Oriental (the 'Arabian Nights'), Celtic and Germanic, thus making use of a supra-national fund of imaginative writing. English romances used the same literary mixture: warlike adventure, whether in the form of internal feuds, crusades against Saracens or encounters with supernatural forces; love and chivalrous service for noble ladies, or rescue of maidens; complications of personal relations due to false accusations, separation and reunification of families; quests for information, revenge, or magic talismans, in particular the Holy Grail.

Rather than love and the over-refined analyses of sentiment and behaviour, characteristic to French romances, English romances emphasize action and adventure; they also concentrate less on elegant adultery and more often have the stories culminate in the 'happy ending' of a conventional marriage.

Among the most celebrated English romances, mention should be made of the early thirteenth-century ***King Horn***, the late thirteenth-century ***The Lay of Havelok the Dane***, and the fourteenth-century ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***, the last being the most famous one.

Much of the action takes place in an enchanted world, and only occasionally does a hero in trouble, such as Havelok during his exile, establish a kind of contact with reality by engaging in useful labour. Even when the plot itself depends but little on magic and supernatural, the tone and the motivation remove it from reality.

The character of Havelok, of ***The Lay of Havelok the Dane*** (c.1300), is of unknown parentage, dispossessed and seeking refuge in England. He is at first obliged to carry on a humble existence, but his noble origins are revealed by a mystical light and the king mark on his shoulder. Havelok returns to Denmark with his bride, kills the earl who assumed kingship and regains his rightful throne of Denmark, and, by removing another usurping earl, gains his wife's deceased father's throne of England. Havelok, now the king of two countries, rules justly and assures his realm's stability through his fifteen sons. ***The Lay of Havelok the Dane***, also known as ***Havelok the Dane*** or ***Havelok***, is the second, after ***King Horn***, oldest surviving romance written in English. The romance comes from popular rather than courtly tradition, as the story dwells on details of ordinary life and labour, and shows a hero who is prepared to defend himself with his fists and a wooden club as much as with his sword.

A more realistic delineation of the character is to be noticed in ***King Horn*** (c.1225), the earliest surviving English poem to have been categorised as a romance. It tells the story of the prince Horn, the son of a king murdered by Saracen pirates, who, matured by both adventure and love, and especially by the painful experience of a double exile (first from his own land, then from the kingdom of his future bride), settles the affairs of two kingdoms, returns to his patrimony as king and is happily matched by a woman equal to him in fidelity, wit, and courage. Maturity here is not maturation, the final stage of the process of growth and development from

childhood through adolescence and youth, but reveals the self-accomplishment of a personality through challenges of life.

The idea of challenge and trial is of primary importance in ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***, together with the motives of quest and the resistance to temptation in terms of Christian knighthood. Actually, Christian elements are found throughout almost all English romances, which co-exist with pre-Christian elements, as in ***Sir Gawain*** the beheading myth is obviously of pagan Celtic origins. Where in later writings, such as novels, the religious institution is satirised or not taken into consideration, in romances it is valued, and the protagonists perform deeds, apart from the matter of a noble lady, for glory of God and Christianity, and in defence of the latter. This aspect is more vivid in the romances categorised as 'Matter of France', in the stories about Charlemagne and his knights, and the struggle against the advancing Saracens.

Despite the variety of subject, setting, and thematic treatment of many earlier English romances, none seriously challenges the sustained energy, the effective patterning, and the superb detailing of the already mentioned ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*** (c.1370) and Sir Thomas Malory's masterpiece ***Morte d'Arthur*** (c.1470), both romances belonging historically to later periods, not Anglo-Norman but the epoch of Chaucer in the case of the former and the fifteenth-century in the case of the latter.

Together with three other untitled alliterative poems in Northwest Midlands dialect, which are purely didactic, and which are designated as ***Pearl***, ***Purity***, and ***Patience***, ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*** is the fourth poem in the Cotton Nero A.X. manuscript. Close resemblance in dialect, diction, and style lead to the assumption of a single authorship of ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***, approximately 1370 or 1390.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a romance of four *fyttes* ('parts'), totalising 2530 lines in stanzas of irregular numbers of alliterate

verses, each stanza being followed by five short lines rhyming a-b, a-b, a, the first line having one stress, while the next have three stresses each. First *fytte* of the poem, 'The Challenge', tells how a giant knight – "*A semigiant on earth I suppose that he was*", exclaims the narrator, "*But at any rate the largest man I consider him to have been, / And the most pleasing of his size that ever did ride*" – completely green in colour, interrupts King Arthur's and his court's feast on New Year's Eve, at Camelot, daring anyone present to chop off his head on condition of receiving a similar stroke a year and a day later at the Green Chapel. As the court falls back frightened, King Arthur offers to give the blow, but his nephew, Gawain, seizes the champion's role and straits off the head of the Green Knight. The intruder, however, picks up his severed head by hair and leaves the place, calling upon Gawain to fulfil the bargain. The second part, 'The Knightly Quest', presents Gawain setting out on All Hallows Day for his rendezvous in North Wales. Lost in a forest on Christmas Day, he finds himself near a great castle where he is graciously welcomed by the lord, the lady, and an aged hag. Gawain's host assures him of the proximity of the Green Chapel and arranges for three days of pleasure. The two men agree to exchange each night whatever kinds of pleasure each has won during the day. In the third *fytte*, 'The Temptation', the lady of the castle forces her attentions on the startled Gawain, and that night, after he receives the game killed by the lord in the day's hunt, he responds with a kiss. The next day is a repetition of the first, but now Gawain responds with two kisses. On the third day lady gives him three kisses and also a green baldric that is considered to be magical in preserving the life of its wearer. Gawain gives three kisses to the lord but improperly retains the magic baldric. *Fytte* 4, 'The Return Blow', tells the end of the poem, in which Gawain, on New Year's Day, presents himself to the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. Gawain shrinks twice from the feints of the giant, but then he steels himself for the third stroke that only gashes

his neck. The Green Knight reveals himself as Bertilak de Hautdesert (lord of the castle) and the aged witch as Morgan-le-Fay, fairy sister of Arthur. The entire stratagem was made to corrupt Gawain and thus to shame the entire court of Arthur and Guinevere. Gawain's scratch was the penalty for violating his agreement to exchange the day's winnings. Henceforth, celebrating and glorifying Gawain's deed, the knights and ladies of the court wore green sashes to commemorate Gawain's experience:

> *The king comforts the knight, and all the court also*
> *Laughs loudly at this and gladly agrees*
> *That lords and knights who belong to the* [Round] *Table,*
> *Each warrior of the brotherhood, a baldric should have,*
> *A band tied about him, of bright green,*
> *And, for the sake of that knight, to wear that, following suit.*
> *For that was granted the fame of the Round Table*
> *And he who owned it would be honoured for ever after.*

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is perhaps the greatest Arthurian romance, but also one of the best narrative poems in English literature, combining the most important elements of the literary pattern of the romance with a wonderful selection of folk motifs, such as New Year's Day feasts, the vegetation myth, the beheading game, the exchange of winnings, the temptation of the hero. The well-packed narration consists of a succession of colourful scenes; the dialog is expert, the action moves forward with a remarkable and rare grace and continuity. Particularly noteworthy is the description of the natural scenery (probably Lake County), and it was not until the romantic poets of the nineteenth-century that English poetry saw the beauties of nature and its subtle effects so well expressed.

The poem neatly unites two ancient Celtic themes: the Temptation and the Beheading. Critics have suggested a previous French romance, no longer existent, that joined the separate themes and that might have been the direct source for ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***. The poem has a tag line in French at the very end (with variations of old spelling it sounds "*Hony Soit Qui Mel(y)ence*"), which was the motto of the Order of Garter founded

about 1348, and it is hypothesized that the romance was intended as part of the knightly indoctrination of the Order. However, it is possible that the author (as the courtly tone suggests, the author could have been a cleric in the Lanceshire, castle of John de Gaunt) composed it as an original work.

The medieval meaning of ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*** may include the following aspects: (a) the romance is a holiday tale, Christmas and New Year representing for the medieval man a brief period of excitement and prolonged revelry during a bleak time of the year when agricultural deities were few, and the season is rendered in spiritual, fanciful tales of marvels, magicians, colourful adventure, and a happy ending; (b) the character of Green Knight is a pre-Christian fertility deity, commemorating the eternal death-and-rebirth cycle of nature (the tradition is still preserved nowadays in many English villages under different popular manifestations); (c) the poem has a didactic purpose, expressing a lesson of chivalry, as the author recognizes with humour and humanity the weaknesses and sinfulness in mankind and demonstrates how these might cause suffering, while virtue – one of the most important values of knighthood – gives strength. Gawain himself, despite the Arthurian court's festive and congratulatory reception, recognizes his fault and refers to the baldric/girdle as a reminder of his mistake:

> *"But your girdle", said Gawain, "– May God bless you! –*
> *That I will most willingly use, not for the lovely gold,*
> *Nor the girdle, nor the silk, nor the hanging pendants,*
> *For wealth nor honour, nor for the beautiful workmanship;*
> *But in sign of my error I shall see it often,*
> *When I ride in fame, remember with remorse,*
> *The faults and the frailty of the crabbed flesh,*
> *How vulnerable it is to catching bits of dirt.*
> *And thus, when pride shall incite me to deeds of arms,*
> *A glance at this luflace shall humble my heart."*

The latter interpretation seems especially likely if it is the same author that wrote the other three alliterative poems ***Pearl***, ***Purity***, and ***Patience*** of the Cotton Nero A.X. manuscript, which reveal a didactic

purpose. The subtle and blatant immorality of many romances is fully supplanted in ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*** by a pervasive morality. The romance exposes and, at the same time, praises the values of Christian chastity, honesty, and faithfulness, as the character of Gawain, except for the baldric episode, is a wholly exemplary model (in later narratives, however, such as in Malory's, the noble Gawain becomes coarse and cowardly). The baldric episode suggests that an old-fashioned chivalric ideal, in which personal integrity is linked to feudal and communal loyalties, co-exists with human failure, as the protagonist fails to give up a girdle given to him by the hostess. Although challenged, Gawain's valour remains indubitable, and his quest becomes a trial not of his valour but of his chastity. This aspect is important because the protagonist discovers in an act of failure his fullest humanity and reveals the most important aspect of the human personality: its individuality.

Another highly individualised character of romance is Sir Thomas Malory's King Arthur, a Christ figure, whose story is traced from the begetting, birth, education, and obtaining of power to his personal and his court's tragic decay in the masterpiece of English medieval literature, and the last of the 'Matter of Britain' texts, entitled ***Morte d'Arthur***. It appears that Thomas Malory (?-1471) wrote his ***Morte d'Arthur*** in 1469-70 during a period of imprisonment, but the text was published and printed posthumously in 1485 by William Caxton (c.1422-1491) who is claimed to have edited and excised the original Malory's version in eight sections (rediscovered only in 1934) and recorded it in twenty-one books. Between the narrative poles of the rise and decay of the king, the author creates long sections about Lancelot, Gareth, the pursuit of the Holy Grail, the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere, and other thematic components that are traced by Malory from a considerably variety of French and English sources converted into a remarkable prose epic. It begins with the optimism

associated with the unknown prince who "*lightly and fiercely*" pulls the sword out of the stone; it ends with the fearful decline of Arthur's greatness and his death, the end itself being haunted by the recurring phrase "*the noble fellowship of the Round Table is broken for ever*" that renders a sense of the changeableness of all human values. Malory, the greatest prose writer of the fifteenth-century, infused epic, tragedy, chronicle, legend, and ballad into romance, and composed an elegy for the dying age of aristocratic chivalry, which also meant the death of English romance as a literary tradition.

Romances represent a definite and important part in the history of English literature, charming the readers of different periods by their appeal to imagination and their moral didacticism intended to enable human conduct. The importance of the medieval romance relies on its courtly values often blended with the popular, its idealism, didacticism and entertainment value. The possible reason for the great popularity of the medieval romance in its time and in later periods is the fact that the text abounds in magic and supernatural element, in the worship of beauty, which might have given to the reader the possibility to escape in the realm of imagination from the violence and hardship of the real life. The audience is charmed by the extraordinary landscape, the perfect moral conduct and the physical beauty of the characters, their feelings of love and justice, which might provide the reader with an experience of spiritual relief that could not be achieved in daily existence. Romances have remained highly influential during the periods of literary history succeeding the Middle Ages, and the elements of the literary system of the romance are found in Renaissance in the works of Ludovico Ariosto, author of the famous epic poem ***Orlando Furioso*** ('Orlando Enraged', 1516), and Torquato Tasso, best known for his poem ***La Gerusalemme Liberata*** ('Jerusalem Delivered', 1580), as well as in Edmund Spenser's ***Faerie Queene***, Sir Philip Sidney 's ***Arcadia***, and some drama of the time, such as romantic comedy. The return to the

thematic universe of the romance is also seen in the escapist poetry of the Victorian Age (as to mention just Alfred Tennyson's ***The Idylls of the King***), and in general in the writings of a *laudator temporis acti*. Most important is that romances are directly connected to the rise of novel, to which they offer – excluding the fantastic, the improbable, and the extravagant – elements of a narrative of love, adventure, the marvellous and the mythic, the travel and the quest, the test of life and initiation, and, to a lesser extent, aspects of the daily, domestic and social life.

Geoffrey Chaucer and His Epoch

On the literary level, the period of English history called 'Chaucer's Epoch', covering the second half of the fourteenth-century, produced both poetry and prose, of which the great examples are the fourteenth-century poem entitled ***The Land of Cockaygne***, the famous alliterative poem ***The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*** ascribed to William Langland (c.1332-1400), and the famous romance ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***. A special place is given to the poet John Gower (?1330-1408), Chaucer's contemporary and friend, who wrote ***Speculum Meditantis*** (in French), ***Vox Clamantis*** (in Latin), and ***Confessio Amantis*** (in English, representing a collection of 133 tales, some of which romances, written around 1386), and who for centuries was considered to be Chaucer's rival in artistic eloquence and narrative art. Concerning the foundation of English prose in the fourteenth-century, one cannot omit John Wycliffe's (c.1320-1384) first translation of the Bible, and ***Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville*** (also known as 'Mandeville's Travels', 'The Book of Sir John Mandeville', and 'The Travels of Sir John Mandeville') by Sir John Mandeville, one of the most popular vernacular texts of the Middle Ages

and the most famous medieval travel-book, written in Anglo-Norman French around 1350 and published between 1357 and 1371.

The period is entirely governed by Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) and his writings. Son of a prosperous London wine merchant, Chaucer is really the first great poet of English literature, never a captive of any special moral, political, or social idea, or of any set of manners. Chaucer lived through the outbreak of bubonic plague, the so-called 'Black Death', which killed a large fraction of English population in 1348, known also as 'The Year of the Plague'. It is not known exactly where he was educated, probably in Thames Street, up the river from London Bridge on the northern bank, where his parents lived and where he was probably born. However, some time in his teens, he entered the household of Prince Lionel, later Duke of Clarence. Chaucer was a page at the court to Elizabeth, Prince Lionel's wife. In October 1359, Chaucer accompanied the Prince's forces into France, which were part of English army that the Prince's father, the king Edward III, took to Continent. There Chaucer was taken prisoner, but was ransomed in March of 1360 and returned to England in May of the same year. By 1366 Chaucer was married to Philippa Roet, one of Queen's ladies (Philippa's sister, Katherine, was mistress and later wife of John of Gaunt, Chaucer's patron), and from 1367 Chaucer was an esquire of the royal household with a regular pension. He was with the King's army in France again in 1369, this time with John of Gaunt, and later in Italy (1372-73), where he may have met Petrarch, but probably not also Boccaccio. Diplomatic missions to Flanders and France followed in 1377 and to Milan in 1378, holding, at the same time, high positions in the services of two kings (Edward III and Richard II). Chaucer died on 25 October 1400 and was buried in the chapel of St Benedict in Westminster Abbey.

Geoffrey Chaucer's literary activity is divided in three periods: French, Italian, and English. His French period (until 1372) includes a

translation of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's ***Roman de la Rose*** (about 22000 verses) into English as ***The Romaunt of the Rose***. The period also includes ***The Book of the Duchess*** (1369), written as an elegy for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster and John of Gaunt's first wife, who died of plague in that year, and ***Complaynt unto Pite*** (1369). The Italian period (1372-1386) was influenced by Petrarch and Boccaccio, and produced ***Lyf of Saint Cecyle***, ***The Story of Constance***, ***Compleynt to His Lady***, ***Anelida and Arcite***, ***The House of Fame*** (a dream vision), ***The Parlament of Fowls***, and ***Troilus and Criseyde*** (his greatest work until 1385, a poem in 'rhyme royal', considered by critics the first novel in English). The last, English period (1386-1400), is that of Chaucer's masterpiece ***The Canterbury Tales*** (c.1387).

The Canterbury Tales is a long narrative poem, perhaps the first in English literature having a concentric narration and a number of different characters that are also the narrators of their own stories. ***The Canterbury Tales*** opens with the ***General Prologue***, where a company of 30 pilgrims meets at the Tabard Inn in Southwark for the journey to Canterbury. Following the prologue, the entire work consists, in the tradition of Boccaccio, in the stories told by these pilgrims. Each pilgrim is a character of the general narration (or frame-story, that of the pilgrimage to Canterbury) conceived by the author as the unifying story and narrated by his textual self that is one of the pilgrims, having a double status of character and narrator. When another pilgrim tells a story, he or she changes the status from the pilgrim character of the general narration to the pilgrim narrator of a different story that becomes a narration within general narration – hence the concentric narrative organization of the poem.

The stories of the pilgrims are linked by the general narration of the pilgrimage to Canterbury from the ***General Prologue***, as well as by certain interaction and interchanges among the pilgrims. In the prologue as in the

whole work, Chaucer assumes a double identity: he is the author who stands apart from his poem, amusedly watching his observer-self carried along by the great wave of human energy that Chaucer himself set in motion; he is the observer, the pilgrim character, the narrator from the prologue, and later the narrator of another story ('Tale of Sir Topas'), Chaucer's pilgrim self, his impressionable counterpart, unable to offer a comparable tale, unable to realize the ironic significance of his own remarks, and whose incompetence adds to the fun of the story and creates satirical effect.

The ***General Prologue*** opens with a passage about spring, the season when people long to escape the bleak atmosphere of winter. Such a passage was a conventional literary device, often used to set the scene in a medieval poem. Yet Chaucer's genius goes beyond the tradition, giving to the reader not only an essential and deep sense of the season itself, making up the picture of England in April, but also revealing a vivid realization of its effects on human beings.

The month of April is chosen for its soft rain, warm wind, freshness, new growth, birds' song, overtones of sexual drive, and the new life in nature that find their counterparts in the inside of the human beings who themselves yearn for change, new experiences, and new beginnings in life. The new beginning, fresh and pure, is implied by the pilgrimage, which is a necessary experience before the greatest Christian holiday Easter, and which becomes a literary device that, with regards to reading audience, represents an important *captatio benevolentiae* mode:

> *When in April the sweet showers fall*
> *And pierce the drought of march to the root, and all*
> *The veins are bathed in liquor of such power*
> *As brings about the engendering of the flower,*
> *When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath*
> *Exhales an air in every and heath*
> *Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun*
> *His half-course in the sing of the Ram has run,*
> *And the small fowl are making melody*
> *That sleep away the night with open eye*

(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages.

In the ***General Prologue***, Chaucer's homodiegetic narrator-self presents a large group of pilgrims from within the context of narration as he is also a pilgrim and thus a character in the poem. In order to give a comprehensive view of his society, the author selects representatives from all levels of the social scale, and from both religious and secular life, men and women, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, simple countryman and sophisticated pilgrims. The prologue is not merely a collection of portraits, an invention of a galaxy of interesting characters, or a portrayal of actual people that he knew, and even if at the end Chaucer says that he has described the *estate* of all the pilgrims, his genius goes much further, transforming, when describing the pilgrims, a well-established but rather stereotypic mode of writing, and rendering a highly individualized group of people who make up the company assembled at the Tabard Inn. In Middle Ages what is termed 'estates satire' was very popular, and represented the literature that described the characteristic features, especially the failings, of the representatives of various 'estates', ranks, occupations, trades, professions and in general the ways of life of the fourteenth-century people.

While indicating the common failings attributed to the social group or profession of each pilgrim, Chaucer makes the reader be aware that each character is a unique individual as well as a social and/or moral type. Both aspects are revealed by a unique character representation strategy, which is a combination of Chaucer's own presentation of the characters through his narrator-self in the prologue and the pilgrims' self-characterization in the course of their own telling of the tales. On one hand, Chaucer's method of describing the characters is a very subtle one, as one should read between the lines to realize that the author actually criticises his pilgrim narrators (except, perhaps, the Knight, the Clerk, the poor Parson, and the Plowman);

they are satirized by the author, and the entire narrative movement is coloured with a rare pervasive authorial irony. On the other hand, through their own storytelling the pilgrims disclose their characteristics; in other words, each character is revealed by its own discourse.

Chaucer's great achievement here is that he manages to assign appropriate narrators to the stories, where the story's genre, style, tone, and values and ideas expressed correspond to the pilgrim narrator's social rank, occupation, set of values, individual traits. For instance, the Knight's tale is a romance of chivalry about two noble lovers competing for a lady; the Miller's tale is a fabliau of seduction by a student of an old carpenter's young wife. The individual stories are linked by the prologue that narrates the journey and describes the pilgrims, by a kind of literary commentary on the stories made by the pilgrims, especially the Host, and by the interconnection of the characters in the form of verbal interchanges resulting in the process of storytelling. For instance, the tale told by the Miller offends the Reeve, who, thinking that the tale about the foolish carpenter is directed at him, tells a story that satirizes an arrogant miller. Likewise, the idea about the dominance of women over men in marriage expressed in the Wife of Bath's tale gets a response in the Clerk's tale, who, in his turn, receives replies from the Franklin and the Merchant.

First in the assembly of "*nine and twenty*" plus the narrator comes the Knight, a nobleman, representing the highest class, and he is indeed, in spite of some touches of sarcasm, an entirely admirable member of his social level, a representative of chivalry. Modest in behaviour and speech, the Knight stands as an ideal exemplar of the Christian concept of knighthood preached by Pope Urban II in 1095 while proclaiming the First Crusade, for he fights for a religious ideal rather than for personal profit. It is suggested that the Knight has participated in rough campaigns in foreign countries, and it seems that Chaucer's intention was to associate the Knight

with the crusaders, although Englishmen played a minor role in the crusades and it is unlikely that any knight could cover so large a territory.

The Squire, given second place, is the Knight's son, also a representative of chivalry, but he is above all a young lover, and his devotion to his lady inspires his action and beliefs. The Squire, unlike his father, does not scorn elegant clothes or disregard his physical appearance; he is the embodiment of the romantic ideal of the young lover with all the appropriate attributes and characteristics. The Squire is accompanied by a Yeoman, whose professionalism and practical ability qualify him as the servant of both the Knight and the Squire.

Chaucer's admirable irony and pervasive satire are at work in the presentation of the next pilgrim, the Prioress (Madame Eglentyne), whom narrator describes in terms of worldly beauty, as if she is the heroine of a romance rather than a woman dedicated to a life of religious devotion. It is suggested in a subtle way that the brooch she wears, which bears the inscription "*Amor vincit omnia*" ('love conquers all'), may refer to the love of God as well as to earthly love, and that the values of the Prioress are worldly rather than spiritual. The Prioress is a beautiful and charming woman, whose courtesy is the dominant characteristic of her personality. She is also fond of luxury – a Nun, as her secretary, "*was riding with her, and three Priests as well*", as well as several pet-dogs – and sensual: "*She was all sentiment and tender heart*", her nose elegant and her mouth "*very small but soft and red*".

As in the case of the Prioress, Chaucer might have been uncertain whether to directly criticize the Monk, the next pilgrim, or just imply that his prime aims are different from religious ones. At that time monks were often satirised for the general lack of spirituality traditionally attributed to the monastic orders, and Chaucer himself breaks the stereotype image of a Spartan monk. Chaucer's Monk is a "*manly man*", fond of fine clothes and

hunting; actually, the first thing one learns about the Monk is that "*hunting was his sport*". Still, the Monk is an attractive figure, his only serious failing being the wrong choice of life and preoccupations.

Like the Monk, the Friar is an attractive figure, "*a very festive fellow*" with his pleasant speech, healthy appearance and musical ability. His main disagreeable feature is that he is greedy for money, extorting it even from poor widows by his fair speech. Like the Squire, the Friar is courteous, but his gallantry is aimed at some financial advantage. Like monks, in Chaucer's time friars were subject to criticism, for they also frequently failed to follow the ecclesiastical ideals to which they should be dedicated. Besides the financial advantage, the friars were particularly criticised for their over-persuasive speech and flattery, often leading to the seduction of women. Chaucer's own criticism includes this aspect, which is revealed as a negative characteristic of the Friar in phrases like "*So glib with gallant phrase and well-turned speech*", "*He'd fixed up many a marriage, giving each*/*Of his young women what he could afford her*", "*Therefore instead of weeping and of prayer*/*One should give silver for a poor Friar's care*", or

> *He knew the taverns well in every town*
> *And every innkeeper and barmaid too*
> *Better than lepers, beggars and that crew.*

Next is a group of pilgrims who belong to the secular world. First comes the Merchant, representing city and a common urban occupation that is traditionally associated with fraud and dishonesty. Chaucer himself implies that his Merchant's dealings are not rightful ones. Whereas with some characters, for example the Friar, the Pardoner, and the Summoner, the victims are indicated, with the Merchant there is no suggestion of the victims of his wrong financial transactions.

Unlike the Merchant, the Clerk (an Oxford Cleric), representing medieval education, is an admirable figure. The Clerk is a teacher and

scholar, and consequently his tale is didactic and moralising. Chaucer's technique here is a kind of contrastive characterisation of the Clerk's interior and exterior aspects of personality. He is not as physical attractive as many of the other pilgrims, with his half-starved appearance, bony horse and old clothes, yet he cares nothing for worldly success, spends no time trying to make money, and, unlike most of the pilgrims, he does not waste words but finds time to pray for the souls of any who will enable him to advance in his studies and gain more knowledge. Both his devotion to scholarship and learning and his readiness to pass his knowledge on would have been dear to Chaucer's own heart, and they also conform to the contemporary to him ideal of a medieval scholar.

With the Sergeant of the Law, who comes next, Chaucer stresses again the importance of word-handling, be it for good or evil purposes. This character's main feature is summed up in the words "*Nowher so bisy a man as he ther was, and yet he seemed bisier than he was*", which indicate that the Sergeant of the Law exaggerates about the great demand for his professional expertise that people might have. As with the Merchant, one should take him at his own evaluation, as the reader is not shown how the victims of his self-enriching activities feel about him.

Chaucer turns from urban to rural life by introducing the Franklin, a well-to-do landowner, a man who takes delight in food, having a "*sangwyn*" ('sanguine') complexion and an attractively fresh, rosy appearance. Although he is not presented as an idealised figure like the Knight or the Parson, the Franklin is a countryside gentleman who has held responsible positions, who offers hospitality generously and there seems to be no suggestion that he is not to be regarded with approval or even some homage. Neither he is multilaterally described nor many lines or epithets given, and, despite some individualization, though Chaucer does not give his name, the Franklin remains anonymous yet a true representative of his own class.

The next pilgrims arrive in a group (the Heberdianer, the Carpenter, the Weaver, the Dyer, and the Tapicer), representing different professional groups but all of them belonging to the same social level. They are ambitious, successful, worldly citizens, on whose class the economy must have depended to a larger extent, but Chaucer has nothing special to say about them, no special insights into their characters, and they never get a chance to tell their stories in the course of pilgrimage. There are no details about their individual professional activities, unlike the Cook who follows them. The Cook is a very skilled exponent of his profession, though the mention of the ulcer of his skin questions his suitability for the occupation. Another pilgrim, the Shipman, is described in terms of the characteristics traditionally attributed to his occupation: he is an experienced sailor and an expert in his craft, his knowledge of the sea is wide, but he is also described as a dangerous man who follows lawless ways, which somehow contradicts with the spirit of the religious pilgrimage he embarked on.

A greater degree of characterization is offered to the Doctor who, like the Sergeant of the Law, can impress the audience with much displayed dignity and an apparently large knowledge that includes astronomy and natural magic. A professional man, the Doctor is a very well-to-do person, material, rational and practical, and, as in the case of many other characters, his real personality remains uncertain, the question being whether the Doctor is to be approved of as an obviously very good specialist, or disapproved of as enriching himself by other people's suffering. The uncertainty is a part of Chaucer's unique character representation technique, having here a twofold perspective: for instance, one may wonder if the times of plague and other illnesses add to the Doctor's wealth, or he really cares about the others and risks his life by attending the sick people; likewise, one may speculate on the fact that the Doctor's lack of study of the Bible is

either because he is indifferent to religion, or he may simply be too busy attending the infected people.

Among the pilgrims, one of the most interesting characters as well as one of the few characters that might appeal to the mind of the modern audience is the Wife of Bath. As with the other pilgrims, this portrait is also rooted in traditional literature, in a kind of misogynistic satire that presents women's faults and suggests the appropriate attitudes towards them that men should adopt. Such medieval writings often denounced women for their pride and bad temper, as the Wife of Bath is quite infuriated at being not allowed to make her offering in church before other women. Chaucer also drew on an earlier tradition that portrays elderly women as knowing all about love and being ready to instruct the others.

There are many lines in ***The Canterbury Tales*** to support the idea that Chaucer gives free way to a medieval sexual obsessed, sensual, even obscene spirit that renders this female character as one the earliest nymphomaniacs in world literature. Armed with an enormous vitality and dominant personality, the Wife of Bath advocates free love, though it is the concept of 'marriage' that she insists upon, claiming that "*Wedding is not sin, so far as I can learn*" and "*Better it is to marry than to burn*". Referring to a paragraph in the Bible, where Jesus criticizes a woman for being married five times, she asks what can be wrong with this if "*God made us to wax and multiply*". Moreover, in the prologue to her tale it is implied that the Wife of Bath might have joined the pilgrimage to Canterbury in hope of finding a sixth husband: "*Welcome the sixth, whenever he appears*". Such commonsensical arguments and open statements represent an important source of comic effect, and, against the accusation that Chaucer's attitude is here misogynistic, in her case the author's manner seems to be humorous rather that critical or satirical.

The Parson and the Ploughman come together; they are brothers and representatives of the lowest social level among the pilgrims. Chaucer's Parson, particularly, unlike the Monk and the Friar, shows the devotion to those ideals to which a human being must aspire. The last pilgrims to be introduced, the Miller, the Manciple, the Reeve, the Summoner, and the Pardoner, are less attractive than other characters. Finally Chaucer introduces the Host, Harry Bailey, a very competent organiser, the "*governour*", the "*juge*" of the storytelling.

The modality in which Geoffrey Chaucer conceived of the character representation aspect of ***The Canterbary Tales*** renders the pilgrims as characters and narrators at the same time. In this way, each pilgrim is an exponent of a social typology and a moral typology as well as of a literary typology. The poem thus contains not only the realistic concern with the contemporary to Chaucer English medieval social background, its people, values and ways of life, and the textual representation of this concern, but also offers information on the literature of the period.

The social typology is complex and the representation of the social life is panoramic, including different social classes, diversity of craftsmanship, occupations, urban life and countryside, individual and family standards, ecclesiastical world and secular life. The social typology is inseparable from the moral typology, and both are related to the literary one. Each character is conceived in such a way that it represents at once a social and a moral type, to which a literary one is assigned.

The Parson, for instance, socially represents the religious life and morally he stands for devotion to religious doctrine, being a model of faith; correspondingly, his tale is actually not a story but a sermon about the seven deadly sins and redemption, and it advocates the real values in life.

Likewise, the Knight, socially, represents the secular life, the upper class, medieval aristocracy, and, as a moral type, he embodies spiritual

nobility, devotion to the cause, moral strength, whereas his tale fully corresponds to his social and moral status as it is a romance, the highest literary standard in medieval period.

The authorial intervention is vivid in the presentation of the pilgrims as individuals and as social types, and especially when moral issues are brought into discussion. Chaucer admires and idealizes features such as those of the Knight, the Clerk, the Plowman, and the Parson, and criticises, applying the literary strategies of satire and irony, those who, like the Prioress, the Friar, or the Merchant, fail in their moral conduct, and the comic effects result from showing the false values and the failures of the characters. Still, Chaucer's character representation strategies reveal the willing development of uncertainty about the revealed personality, as the real personalities of the characters remain ambiguous due to the employment of a dual perspective of characterization. The author allows the reader to approve of each pilgrim by letting the character present his or her reassuring public image, though one may suspect that the appearance does not entirely coincide with reality.

Concerning its structural organization, ***The Canterbury Tales*** is a collection of twenty-four different stories in prose and verse, with individual prologues to the tales, some of which are incomplete. They are told as entertainment by a group of pilgrims from various social levels riding to Canterbury and enjoying the weather and a few days of good fellowship. The difficulty of linking together such a diversity of tales of different characters of strong individual tastes and contrasting social backgrounds is remarkably overcome by the element of pilgrimage, which brings together a number of otherwise unconnected stories, ranging in literary type and including courtly romance, religious legend, sermon, moral exemplum, fairy-tale and other kinds of narrative.

The individual tales receive continuity by a series of narrative links, such as the verbal interchanges among the pilgrims. Some of these links are missing, and in consequence the poem as it stands consists of nine fragments, the longest run of continuous narrative containing six tales. There are also other signs that Chaucer did not complete the great work he designed, among which the fact that the original plan proposed by the Host required each of the thirty pilgrims to relate four tales, but later he speaks as though he had demanded only one tale from each pilgrim.

In this respect, at the simplest assessment, one may argue that Chaucer failed in giving to his poem a coherent form, as he might have failed in rendering distinct and concrete personalities for his characters. Yet it is this uncertainty about human life, this complex and dynamic human soul, these intangible truths about human existence that define Chaucer's literary spirit, a spirit that makes him so much our contemporary. And despite the gaps and drawbacks that reveal an unfinished state of the whole work, ***The Canterbury Tales***, of all medieval poems, has the coherence and imaginative drive of a great work of literature, presenting a firmly realized view of life and giving to modern man a strong sense of contact with the life and manners of the fourteenth-century England. The poem is a picture of the contemporary to Chaucer society, an important source of extra-literary information, among which an insight into history, as to mention just the fact that the characters of the Monk, the Prioress, and the Friar clearly reveal the decline of the religious institution in Middle Ages.

The Canterbury Tales has acquired a definite place in the history of English literature, but its thematic material, though a reliable exponent of the fourteenth-century English life, has also universal resonance and escapes the bounders of its period of composition. Moreover, the poem plays an important part in strengthening the literary continuity between the periods, as it reveals, in particular by the idea of a fresh beginning from the ***General***

Prologue, or by the pagan elements and the interest in the cultural heritage of the ancient period from the Knight's tale, the first traces of a new literary tradition, that of Renaissance, whose glories were just over the horizon.

Fifteenth-Century Literature

The fifteenth-century is the last period of English medieval literature. Except Sir Thomas Malory's prose romance ***Morte d'Arthur*** (in which the account of the legendary exploits of the King Arthur and his Knights reaches its apogee), ***The Kingis Quair*** by James Stewart who reigned as James I, King of Scotland (1394-1437), the poetry of Lydgate and Hoccleve, the popular ballads, some folk drama, and the secularised religious drama, the century was a weak literary age. Geoffrey Chaucer exercised a profound influence over English writers from the fifteenth-century, and the key figures in the flowering of a post-Chaucerian poetic tradition were John Lydgate (?1370-1449), once highly acclaimed for ***Troy Book***, ***Siege of Thebes***, and ***Fall of Princes*** (1431-8), and Thomas Hoccleve (?1369-1426), once esteemed for ***The Regement of Princes*** (1411-2).

The standard collection of ***The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*** (1882-1898), edited by Francis James Child, consists of 305 poems in over 1000 versions, many of them being 400 years or older before they first appeared in print. Some of the most famous popular ballads are ***Sir Cawline***, ***Clerk Saunders***, ***The Two Sisters***, ***Childe Waters***, ***The Geste of Robin Hood***, and others.

The ballad is difficult to include in one of the three literary genres, being a unique combination of the lyrical and narrative element, where the experience of usually one character involved in one event has universal significance and becomes symbolical for the human condition in general.

There is perhaps no country of Europe whose popular imagination would not have given birth to ballads. The Romanian mind contains the famous ballad of Master Manole who entombed his beloved wife in the walls of the monastery he was building, so it would last forever. What makes this literary work a ballad is that the epical element is rendered by a high degree of emotional appeal, the character's personal emotions and states of mind conveying a tragic meaning of a fundamental situation – 'sacrifice for art's sake' – reified in a personal experience with universal resonance.

Likewise, English ballads are anonymous folk creations transmitted, throughout the Middle Ages, by mouth and ear exclusively. They are short narratives, stressing a crucial situation, focusing on a single, often enigmatic clash, minimising the description and the moralizing didacticism, and sacrificing the happenings, details and explanations for the vivid drama of the central episode dominated by the concrete human experience.

On the structural level, the ballad is an impersonal narration, the action unfolding itself in event and dialogue with little comment from the narrator. The stanza form, so-called 'ballad stanza', has an accentual and rhyme pattern 4a3b4c3b (a rhymed septenary of septenarian couplet). The metre in ballads is often irregular and the rhyme is loose. In some ballads there is a refrain, sometimes composed of meaningless syllables, sometimes being a thematic refrain. The constant repetition of the refrain unifies the ballad and creates a special effect on the listener. Sometimes the repetition expresses urgency of an action, sometimes it is intended for pure vocal pleasure, in both cases building up the excitement. Now regarded as independent verse, the medieval ballad was always a song, never recited without music, and often requiring a pleasurable choral response. In relation to this musical aspect of the ballad, the term 'ballad' has acquired an arbitrary connotation, nowadays, for example, meaning the words in the songs of slow music.

The above presented characteristics of English medieval popular ballads belong to the so-called 'art ballad'. The art ballad should be distinguished from the carol, whose lack of a narrative structure is supplanted by pure lyricism. The art ballad should be also distinguished from the 'street ballad' that displays a multiplicity of incidents, artificial motivation of action, a descriptive quality with no real artistic value. The street ballads have brought ballad writing tradition into low repute for centuries due to its interest in the weird and the violent in human conduct, its main origin often being the every newsworthy item of scandal, gossip or violence, such as adultery, street fight or public hanging. The framework of such works was usually worked and re-worked with only a few changes of names, and they were often printed on broadsheets for hanging in public places.

In its turn, the medieval art ballad has its origins in the experiences of common people, in the human mind fascinated by the unusual and the bizarre in human action, by the superstition and the supernatural, revealing the connection to some pre-Christian rituals, and expressing the sense of an inescapable fate governing human life. Many medieval art ballads attack the clergy and the forces of law and order; they reveal the simple man's ambivalence toward the rich and the noble.

It is the art ballad that literalizes these aspects of human experience, revealing true aesthetic values, and, unlike most folk literature with the happy ending of fairy-tales and the didacticism of legends and fables, the ballads are generally tragic and symbolic for human condition. It is the art ballad that proved literary continuity, being a source of inspiration for the literary authors of later periods, in particular the promoters of the great British 'Romantic Revival'. The artistic techniques of the medieval art ballads were adopted by numerous English writers of the romantic period for the purpose of opposing the neoclassical revival of the ancient classical

tradition by the revival of the national cultural heritage, in particular that of the medieval period, as to mention just the great romantic works ***The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*** by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and ***La Belle Dame Sans Merci*** by John Keats.

The literary distinction of the fifteenth-century is largely given by its drama. The dramatic tradition in English medieval literature includes many forms of drama, both religious and secular, of which the most important ones are 'mystery play', 'morality', and 'interlude'.

The mystery plays, or mysteries, presumably brought to England after the Norman Conquest, were closely related to the institution of Church under whose protection they had risen, and as such they represented the religious drama of the medieval period. Scholars held the opinion that mystery plays developed from the liturgical drama ***Quem Quaeritis*** ('whom do you seek?') described by Bishop Ethelwold in the tenth-century. Critics claim that mysteries resulted from the efforts of the clergy to present the scriptural history in dramatic form as if to provide visible evidence for the wonders of God and to explain the significance of the feast of Corpus Christi. Other usual names for these plays in medieval England were 'miracle', or the Latin 'ludus', or 'history'.

Mysteries are also called 'liturgical play', or 'sacred play', or 'Biblical play', or 'Saints' play'; a great part of them were organized in 'the cycles'; the usual method of staging was 'the pageant', the word being also applied to name the play itself. Some critics take the names separately and consider some of these plays as representing distinct forms or types of the medieval religious drama, attempting at establishing a typology and at finding the exact peculiarities of each and the differences among them. Other critics, due to the lack of English equivalents to some French or Spanish plays, and especially due to the uncertainty about some of the surviving extant manuscripts concerning the presumed revision and re-

arrangement in their editing over centuries, use the generic name of ‘mystery’ for the entire English medieval religious drama. It is said that the word came into use in the eighteenth-century, being applied first by Robert Dodsley, the editor of a volume of old plays selected and published in 1744.

Concerning the rise of the mystery play, ancient drama being considered pagan and thus rejected, the medieval religious authority, conceiving the possibility of sending through theatre a certain message to society, accepted the theatrical representation, but imposed to medieval theatre a highly didactic and moralising aspect that for a long period became its main characteristic. There existed a possibility for the ancient concept of the ‘tragic’ to re-appear in connection to the Christian doctrine and in relation to the idea of the primordial sin and the human suffering as the consequence of the primordial sin. The suffering meaning damnation could take the shape of determinism equal to the power of destiny. Yet in medieval religious drama the emphasis is neither on the sin nor the damnation, but on the act of redemption. Unlike in ancient Greek tragedy, there is neither struggle against the destiny nor the awareness of the guilt and sin. Once the divine message is received, the character obeys it unconditionally; there is no struggle with the problems of life and destiny, and in accordance to the Christian doctrine the main quality of the character is piety not pride. The omnipotence of the Christian God is obvious in the mysteries, and besides its educational aspect, the medieval theatre created a strong mystical atmosphere, a religious mysticism imposed again by the church.

The mystery plays were for the most part dramatized scripture, with the New Testament as the main source. The plays were presented not as entertainment but became pedagogical tools in the hands of the clergy that regarded dramatization as engaging and didactic about the understanding of the Bible. In particular, the purpose was to teach salvation history to large masses, the lay people who were either illiterate (could not read Latin, the

language of Church) or had no access to books (manuscripts being scarce and expensive).

Because the medieval sacred drama attempted to cover the history of humankind from Genesis to the Judgment Day, many of the plays in the extant manuscripts belong to 'the cycles', meaning that the plays are united by the thematic principle of 'Man as the hero' in a series, a dramatic sequence of plays dealing with the subjects starting from the Creation, followed by the Fall and its consequences, then the Redemption foretold by the prophets and accomplished by the Nativity and Passion of Christ, and finally the Resurrection of Christ.

There are four main English cycles (the Chester cycle with twenty-four plays, perhaps the earliest, the York cycle with forty-eight plays, forty-three plays of the Coventry cycle, and thirty-two of the Wakefield cycle, also known as Towneley cycle), and it is also considered that cycles were produced at Canterbury, Newcastle and Lincoln. The cycles share similar subject matter, but differ in the modes of treatment of the subject, as well as in quality, authorship and time of production, as the manuscripts were often revised and re-arranged.

The production and performance of the mystery plays involved wagons or floats called 'pageants'. The word firstly meant the movable platform, usually a carriage, on which the play was performed, but was soon applied to the play itself meaning at its simplest a 'play on wheels'. Traditionally, each carriage had two mansions, like a higher and a lower room, the higher one arranged for the actors to play. Each play of a cycle had its own carriage that moved along in procession giving its play in turn at each stopping place. The wagon for ***The Second Shepherds' Play*** might have used two mansions, one for Mary and Jesus and one for Mak's house, and perhaps a third one to represent the sheepfold. There is also evidence of other methods of staging of the medieval plays, such as temporary stages

made of planks on barrels, and of performances in the round, with spectators on all sides.

It is known that throughout the fourteenth- to sixteenth-century there was a great number of mysteries produced annually or over longer intervals in many English towns on different celebratory occasions, on special Church festive days, including Christmas and Easter, the most popular time being the Corpus Christi Day that falls in June. There is historical evidence that the performance of the mystery plays was of great interest to a medieval town, where all shops were closed, all work stopped, all streets empty and houses locked up. It is known that in 1417 two performances of a Christmas play in three parts ('Nativity', 'Visit of Magi', and 'Slaughter of the Innocents') were given: one for the bishops of the Council of Constance, another for the people of the town. Plays were performed in public, but also in private, as it is known that in 1416 Henry V entertained Sigismund the Emperor with a play about St George.

Of the extant manuscripts, the literary history names such plays as ***Harrowing of Hell***, ***Abraham and Isaac***, ***Building of the Ark***, and others, the most impressive of all mysteries being the ***Passion of Christ*** (fourteenth-century) and ***The Second Shepherds' Play*** (ascribed to an anonymous fifteenth-century author known as the 'Wakefield Master').

The Second Shepherds' Play (c.1475) of the Wakefield cycle is the second of two 'shepherds' plays', the first being a conventional retelling of the Nativity of Christ and His adoration by the shepherds. ***The Second Shepherds' Play*** also covers the scriptural account of Christ's Nativity, the revelation of the infant Jesus to the shepherds, but its plot is almost secular, its structure consisting of the introduction of three shepherds, the arrival of Mak, alternation of scenes with shepherds and scenes with Mak and Gill, return to the moor, arrival of the angel, and the events of the Nativity of Christ. It is surprising to find in a medieval literary work so much little

attention accorded to the role of the Virgin Mary as Mother of Christ. It is that the play minimises the importance of Saint Mary for human salvation as a symbol of piety and forgiveness but mostly as the Mother of Christ, and thus the 'co-saviour' with Christ.

Instead, the sacred story of the Nativity of Christ in the play merges with anachronistic elements contributing to the humour, the psychologically realistic characters whose complaints and concerns relate to a late-medieval audience, the realistically depicted marriage and home life of Mak and Gill providing the comic relief, but also indignation at their crime and dishonesty. The shepherds' attitude towards the guilty couple is an example of Christian charity, of Divine Love, close to the tone of moralities. Yet it is the emphasis on the medieval-seeming individual human experience in the play that allows critics to claim that ***The Second Shepherds' Play*** represents a radical stage in the gradual secularization of medieval theatre, in the 'humanization of God' in medieval drama, and which, along with the use of songs, proverbs and colloquial patterns of speech, confers to the play its indubitable artistic qualities.

Gradually, the production of the mystery plays passed from the care and control of the Church into the hands of certain tradesmen's guilds, which arranged and financed plays on the subjects that better matched their craftsmanship (for instance, the masons' guild might present the Noah story, the weavers the Crucifixion), thus making a good show into an advertising of their work and products. In France as well as in England the escape of the drama from the control of the clergy into the possibility of a greater freedom and the extending the subjects might have led to the production of masterpieces, but the plays become poor, dull and simple, lacking artistic quality of any sorts. Important for fostering the love of English people for the theatre, the sacred plays were condemned for their childishness and

disgrace by both Protestants and Roman Catholics, and even the guilds stopped spending time and money for their preparation.

Apart from the hostility of Protestantism to a drama developed under Roman Catholic Church, another major reason for the decline of the mysteries was that a better dramatic entertainment was becoming available, put on in the late fifteenth-century by small companies of professional strolling actors. The mysteries in England were forbidden by Henry VIII, and the entire sixteenth-century saw the decline and finally the disappearance of the mystery plays.

The nearest in medieval literature to mystery play in tone and manner of production was the morality, or morality play. Although the religious component in some moralities is quite strong, the moralities are accredited for having marked the end of the cycles of religious plays, and, together with the interludes, they are considered to form the link between the medieval and modern drama.

Different from the strict religious context of the mystery play, the morality is a more or less of secular nature, a poetic kind of drama, a dramatized allegory in which universals or abstractions, such as Good Will, Conscience, Mercy, Patience, Perseverance, Pride, Vice, Greed, Shame, Vanity, and others alike, are personified and struggle for human soul. The allegorical method applied in the play permits to conceive the human characteristics and desires as personalities showing the dual nature of the human being, in whom good and evil fight for the supremacy over the soul of the hero called Man, Everyman, or Humanum Genus. The morality play may deal with a single issue applicable to a certain person, or it may have as the central figure humanity in general, as in the most famous medieval morality play entitled ***Everyman*** (c.1500). ***Everyman*** is considered a religious morality play, and other classifications may include the doctrinal morality play (John Bale's ***King Johan***), political morality (***Magnificence***),

and didactic morality (***Wyt and Science***). There is evidence that the first English morality play was performed at York during the fourteenth-century, and that the earliest extant morality is the fifteenth-century play entitled ***The Castle of Perseverance***.

The finest of all medieval moralities is the anonymous ***Everyman***, having an earlier Dutch analogue, ***Elckerlijk***. ***Everyman*** clearly reveals that the main quality of the morality play is its moral didacticism, and allegory is employed to dramatize the existing in every individual moral struggle between the good and bad qualities that might take man toward either heaven or hell. The Almighty God is displeased by Everyman who seeks wealth and worldly pleasure, and has forgotten God. Sent by God as a messenger, Death informs Everyman that he is to leave the earth and go on a long journey to account before the Lord. Everyman learns that there is no returning from this journey, and, unwilling to leave this earth, Everyman pleads escape from the journey, and even tries to bribe Death but is refused. Summoned by Death, Everyman is yet allowed to find someone to accompany him on the journey.

Everyman learns what the true goods in life are as he is deserted by his companions (Fellowship), kinsmen (Kindred), and wealth (Goods) he has relied on but they turned to be apparent goods and false friends. Everyman receives comfort only from his weak and long neglected Good-Deeds. Only after Everyman is taken to Confession and does penance for his sins, the Good-Deeds get strong enough to join him in the journey of Death into the next world. Good-Deeds and Knowledge advise him to take with him on the journey Discretion, Beauty, Strength, and his five senses (Five-Wits). When Everyman actually reaches the grave, only Good-Deeds and Knowledge remain by his side, the rest departing in haste. Knowledge remains behind hearing the songs of the angels, and Good-Deeds accompany Everyman to Heaven to plead his cause in his account to Almighty God.

It is pointed out that human being can take along from this world nothing that he has received, neither his strength nor beauty, but only what he has given or made, that is the good deeds. The action of the play is within the soul of man, and the moral-didactic effect results from the dramatization of the inner quest for the understanding of the meaning of life and the value of redemption. The salvation is possible by the forces of good triumphing over the forces of evil in their battle in the human soul. The man must realise his potential alone as alone he must face and accept the dreadful finality of death. ***Everyman*** exteriorizes this inner spiritual struggle between good and evil, God and Devil, and emphasises man's need for salvation and for defeating the temptations that beset him on his journey through life to death.

Morality plays developed in the late fourteenth-century, were extremely popular throughout the fifteenth-century, and by the sixteenth-century some of the morality plays contained realistic and farcical element to such a degree that they contributed much to the development of the interlude and influenced the later establishment of the tradition of English comedy, though in Elizabethan period the morality plays lost their popularity.

Concerning the true secularization of English medieval theatre and the transition from English medieval to modern drama of Renaissance, the most important part was played by the interlude, which developed in England in the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century. The interlude is a variety of the medieval secular drama, coexisting in its period with mysteries (Biblical plays, or sacred plays) and moralities (some of them having a strong religious component).

Other medieval types of dramatic representation of a more or less secular nature are farces, carnival or Shrovetide plays, and puppet shows. The actors performing in these secular plays were merchants, clerks,

ordinary citizens who would form groups of performers during the carnival season; another group of actors was represented by the Fool companies, consisting of youths banded together, sometimes under a secret code, to play farces and vulgar satires on such subjects as sex and digestion; another group of performers was formed by the people connected to universities and schools, who were attracted to plays of a more scholarly nature, and who made dramatic exercises in Latin, imitations of Seneca and Terence, and adaptations from the classic drama.

The closest to the modern idea of the professional actor were the strolling players who were dramatic performers as well as acrobats, minstrels and jugglers, successors of the ancient mimes and pantomimic actors. In medieval period, sometimes the same stage was used for a sacred play, morality, or a farce, which were given in immediate succession, and it is likely to assume that the actors of the farce, interlude, or the Shrovetide plays (also called interludes, or sotties, and focused on the comic and indecent aspects of society), were in many cases the same people who participated as performers in mysteries or moralities.

Concerning the rise of English drama, among these varieties of medieval religious and secular plays, interludes clearly reveal the transition from allegory, the abstract, the Biblical, the moral and the didactic-pedagogical toward realistic treatment, the homely, the particular and the individual. The term ‘interlude’ came to mean a brief dramatic performance, sometimes just a dialogue between two persons, more often a short play presented by performers on different occasions, usually at meals, feasts, and other sorts of entertainment. Mostly used as one of the features of banquet entertainment, the interlude was also occasionally used in the program of the medieval vaudeville along with juggling acts, magic acts, wrestling, or it was used as a comic diversion between the more serious parts of a sacred play. Par excellence a humours piece, the interlude might still have had its

origin in the morality play and the Latin moralistic 'school play', an interlude borrowing from both types the allegoric technique and the didactic purpose, or, when these aspects are not exhibited at all, interludes imitate French farce. The most famous medieval interludes were John Rastell's ***The Nature of the Four Elements***, ***Gentilness and Nobility***, and ***The Field of the Cloth of Gold***, and John Heywood's ***The Four P's*** and ***The Merry Play of John John the Husband, Tyb His Wife, and Sir John the Priest***. Heywood and Rastell are perhaps the first English dramatists who recognize that what justifies a play is its comic treatment, its ability to amuse, its satire and humour, although at its best the humour in the medieval play was diverting and naïve. With John Heywood (1497-1580), especially, the interlude became witty and full of action, satirical and entertaining, turning from Biblical themes or rustic subjects to Chaucer and French fables. Concerning the rise of English realistic comedy in Elizabethan age, Heywood is even accredited with making possible the smooth change of the medieval secular play into the Renaissance comedy.

Among the dramatic forms in medieval English literature, the mystery, morality and interlude are the most important and wide-spread ones. These types of medieval drama represent parts of a process of development and change whose beginnings were long before the fifteenth-century. The rise of British drama has its origin in the liturgical drama that changes into mystery play, followed by morality play, and finally interlude.

This process leads English drama toward the concern with the particular and daily existence, the extension of subjects, the freedom of artistic expression, the realistic treatment, the comic effect.

This process leads English drama from the moral and didactic to the entertaining, from the canonical to the literary, from the religious to the secular, from the sacred to the profane, literarily *pro fano* ('before the temple'), that is from church to churchyard and then to market-place, town

squire and other places of public performance. One may notice here that the drama of Middle Ages embarks on a course of development almost similar to that of the ancient drama (from religious rituals to secular public performance) and even shares with it certain characteristics (such as the emphasis on the civic role of drama, or the presence of a sacrificial hero, the scapegoat, or the use of a choir).

In the sacred-profane dichotomy, one may also notice that the drama of Middle Ages shares a similar condition with another important medieval literary tradition, that is the romance. Like drama, the romance reveals the mixture of sacred and profane elements – here regarding the theme of love – which might be the consequence of the medieval belief that 'love leads man to God', or might be taken in connection to the Platonic model of love. The lady of the romance, represented in relation to the cult of the Virgin Mary, is an angelic, superior being who belongs to the world of ideas, whereas the man, exposed to weakness and error, is bound to earth, to the imperfect world of phenomena, things and forms. Therefore the woman is unapproachable and their unity is impossible, but more important is that this thematic aspect of the romance has its literary continuity in that it finds its expression in the literature of Renaissance as well, in particular in the sonnet, where, like in the medieval romance, the attributes of the religious sacred adoration are used to express profane feelings.

The medieval drama reveals its own literary continuity in that the physical movement of the medieval drama from the church to the outdoors has its corresponding counterparts in the text of the medieval drama, in the thematic and structural changes that occurred in the text to create the profane content, the secularization of the concern, the literariness, which, among other factors, took medieval drama into the heights of the Renaissance dramatic tradition, of which the Elizabethan theatre of Marlowe, Shakespeare and Jonson was the crown.

Recommended Course Syllabus

Concerning the learning process of the students in their English literature classes, the following literary aspects of Old English and medieval English literature, as well as the following writers and literary texts might become the topics of a course outline, or matters of concern reified in lecturing, taking notes, individual readings, theoretical and practical assignments, participation in seminars and class discussions, and other forms of class and extra-class activities that are to be considered in relation to a course syllabus in English literature:

1. Introductory discussion: aim, objectives and contents of the course; approaches to literature (literary theory, literary criticism, literary history), history of literature and the diachronic approach to literature;

2. National versus world literary history, the peculiarities of literary development in Britain;

3. Old English (Anglo-Saxon) period: general historical and cultural background, general characteristics of its literature;

4. Old English (Anglo-Saxon) poetry: general characteristics, major works;

5. Old English (Anglo-Saxon) lyric poetry: Caedmon, Cynewulf, anonymous lyrics (***The Wanderer***), Biblical poems;

6. Old English (Anglo-Saxon) epic poetry: ***Beowulf*** (literary significance, epic tradition, character representation strategies, Christian and pagan elements);

7. Old English (Anglo-Saxon) prose and Christian epics (religious texts, historical writings): Aldhelm, the Venerable Bede, King Alfred the Great;

8. Middle Ages to early Renaissance: general historical and cultural background (the consolidation of English nation, language, arts, literature);

9. The Anglo-Norman literature: French influence, English medieval chronicles, poetry and prose (characteristics, representatives, major works);

10. English medieval romance: general characteristics, literary typology, English versions of the French pattern, the importance of the Arthurian legends in the development of English literature, ***Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*** (medieval elements, themes and meanings, characters and narrative structure);

11. Sir John Mandeville (***Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville***) and William Langland (***The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman***);

12. Geoffrey Chaucer: his epoch, work, influence on contemporary writings, the essence of Chaucer's contribution to world literature and his importance in the growth of English literature;

13. ***The Canterbury Tales*** – the monument of medieval English literature (literary significance, representation of personality, narrative strategies);

14. Fifteenth-century: beginnings of English drama (***The Second Shepherds' Play*** and ***Everyman****Ошибка! Закладка не определена.*), Sir Thomas Malory (***Morte d'Arthur***), English popular ballads.

Any of the following authors and literary texts are recommended as matters of critical evaluation, where detailed reference to each of the selected literary texts is required in relation to each writer's literary activity in general, his/her place in English and world literature, indebtedness to the past, influences on future writing, and contemporary connections:

Beowulf,
The Wanderer,
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,
Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville (Sir John Mandeville),
The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman (William Langland),
The Canterbury Tales (Geoffrey Chaucer),
Everyman,
Morte d'Arthur (Sir Thomas Malory),
A Gest of Robyn Hode.

Suggestions for Further Reading

General Literary History and Criticism

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